

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY

M A G A Z I N E

MARCH 1994

## THE RED CONVERTIBLE

A Charlotte Kent  
Murder Mystery  
by Mary  
Kittredge

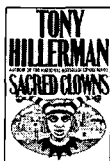
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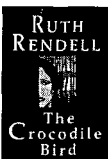
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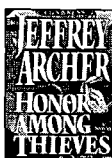
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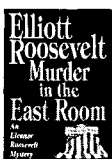
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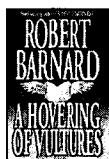
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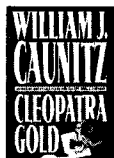
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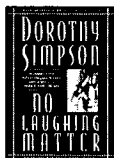
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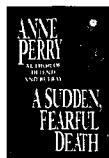
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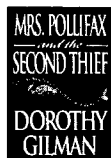
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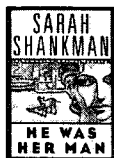
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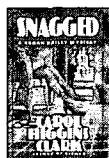
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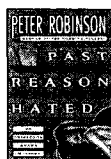
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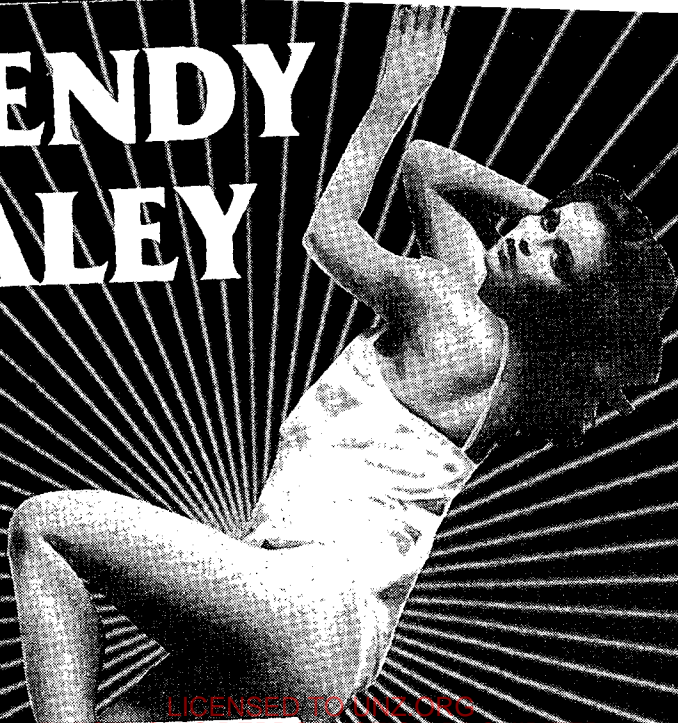
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# WENDY HALEY



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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**I**n this issue . . . B. K. Stevens is back with police duo Walt and Sergeant Bolt, the latter smoothing the way as usual, the former as bewildered as always. A delight, those two.

And readers of several years' standing are likely to be especially pleased to find a new story by William T. Lowe about spectral family retainer Jonathan in "A Member of the Family." (Jonathan saved Miss Polly from an undesirable suitor in "Second Nature," AHMM, September, 1990.)

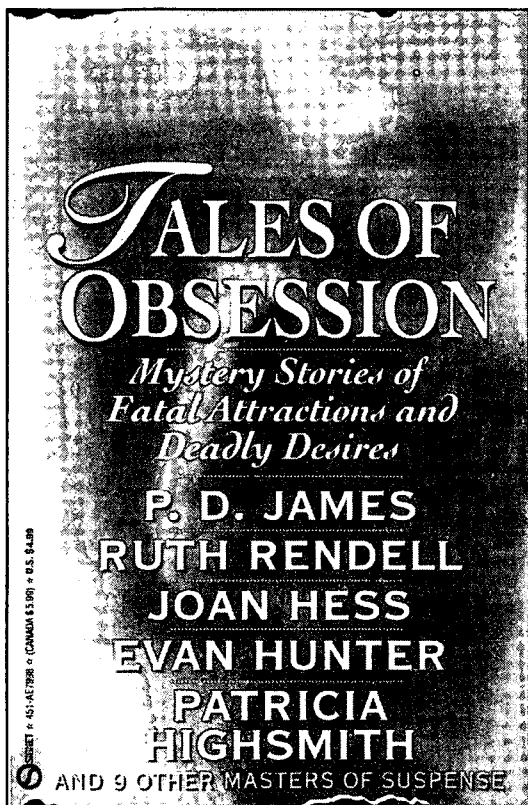
Michael Z. Lewin introduces us to the appealing Lunghi

creature of the Lunghi crew, a brand-new one.

Speaking of reprints (we rarely do them, except for the Mystery Classic, but once in a while . . .), we happen to have a second such story in this issue, Morris Hershman's "The Satisfied Victim," published in England in 1962. We daresay Mr. Hershman's clever ending will catch you as much by surprise as it did us, *and* the lawyer in his tale.

"Shattered Crystal" by Carol Davis Luce is a first short story by the author of three (to date)

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FICTION



*Illustration by Steve Chalker*



“Pages,” said my agent Bernie Hol-  
loway in the sad, anxious tone he always uses any time I am writing more slowly than I can type. Bernie feels that creative writing is actually very much like typing copy, only the original material is in my brain instead of on some sheet of paper, so why not simply transfer it at top speed instead of wasting time thinking about it?

“Pages,” he repeated, “with words on them. You know, made of letters, like *a, b, c . . .*”

“Bernie,” I replied reasonably, resisting the impulse to tell him that if it were so easy he would be doing it himself. “Bernie, I am absolutely fine here. You’ll have the manuscript right on time.”

I swallowed hard, averting my gaze from my word processor screen, which was entirely blank except for that infernal blinking cursor. “Ha ha,” I trilled, “it’s a piece of cake. What could be so difficult about writing a simple little mystery novel?”

“Charlotte, you’re a rotten liar,” Bernie said.

“And you’re a rotten agent,” I shot back. “We’re made for each other. Now leave me alone so I can finish this thing, will you? The deadline’s hanging over me like a load of bricks.”

“Yeah, and it’s going to come down on you like that, too, if you don’t get going. Listen, if you’re having trouble, why not stay in the apartment? All that domestic bliss was rotting your brain cells, anyway, like too much sugar on your teeth.”

And that, in a nutshell, is the thing about Bernie and the reason he remains my agent: he may not always score a bull’s-eye, but he always hits the target. This time his aim was off by only a hair, and only to spare my feelings.

“Thanks, Bernie. I’ll keep it in mind.” Bernie had a studio apartment for hard cases like me; furnished with a table, a chair, a keyboard, and a bed barely large enough for one person, it was stocked with the freelance writer’s four major food groups: bagels, cream cheese, coffee, and Irish whiskey. The trouble was, Bernie wouldn’t let you at any of those things until you turned over your quota of finished pages each day, and he wouldn’t let you out of the apartment, either.

“Now hang up, Bernie, so I can get back to work.”

Whereupon he did, and I definitely didn’t. Without my stepson Joey Rosen, who was away at school, and my main squeeze Rob Solli, who was away somewhere I didn’t even

want to think about, the house was so empty it felt as if it could suck itself inside out. I got up and wandered around in it, going from room to vacant room as if by being in them I could somehow make them feel inhabited.

But I couldn't. Joey's room was neat and shipshape, reminding me that he would never really live there again. All the relics of his boyhood life—his science fiction paperbacks, his collection of Iron Maiden tapes, even his Steam-in' Steve Clarke guitar pick—sat silently in their places like fossils in an archaeological dig. He was in Miami, now, pursuing one degree in classical literature and another in biology and doing research on the side at the Miami Center for Spinal Cord Injury. If he ever got really good at it, he joked cheerfully on his infrequent visits home, he might even get himself out of a wheelchair someday.

Solli's little office I barely glanced into. There was almost nothing to see there anyway. He'd taken his books, his computer, and all his framed diplomas and certificates. As a surgeon, he'd had quite a lot of these; besides their faint marks against the old cream paint, the only thing left on the wall was a snapshot of me.

I closed the door swiftly before I could start having trouble breathing again and went back to the living room, where I'd set my word processor up on the table by the front window so I'd have something to stare at besides my own persistent failure to do what I'd set out to do. The window looked out on a plot of green front lawn, a sidewalk, and a quiet, tree-lined residential street in the Westville section of New Haven.

As I plopped miserably in front of the word processor again, the red convertible went by. It was a Mazda Miata, small and sporty with custom wheels and a black canvas top, looking as if it ought to be whizzing along some curving, improbably scenic country road. Instead, it cruised slowly past, made a U-turn at the intersection, and cruised back again for the tenth time in the past three days.

Musingly, I regarded the little vehicle, which stuck out like the proverbial you-know-what among the neighborhood's more usual traffic: stodgy Volkswagens, civilized Saabs, and a smattering of the workaday domestic products the Japanese have been tactful enough to allow us to continue manufacturing. As before, the Miata slowed in front of the house diagonally across the street from

mine, then went on up the street and around the corner, out of sight. Behind it drove an old Volkswagen bug, a Ford pickup with a logo stenciled on the side—S & M Builders: We'll Whip Your House into Shape!—and a small yellow schoolbus.

Even then I registered the setup as odd, but I didn't think burglars were likely to be casing the local joints in a little red sports car that, on our turf, was about as identifiable as the Goodyear blimp. Maybe somebody was simply thinking of moving here and was sensible enough to check out the area a few times first.

Not until several hours later, long after I had shut down the damned word processor and eaten my damned TV dinner and cried my damned nightly quota of tears into my damned pillow did I hear the gunshots. Then came the screaming and the sound of a small, sporty engine racing away and the damned silence.

**W**hen Solli and I moved together into the Westville house, we had not promised to love, honor, or obey. I'd promised to do the cooking, since if Solli had done it we would soon have died of starvation or food poisoning, and he'd promised to keep track

of the bills and pay them on time, since if I had done it we would soon have been sitting out on the street watching the sheriff's men cart away all our possessions. We each promised to pony up our share of the expenses—Solli did this easily and I did it with difficulty, but we managed—and when other chores needed doing around the place, we negotiated or we shared them.

The Andersons, who lived in the house diagonally across the street, did things a little differently. First of all, they were married, to judge by the big gold wedding rings they wore. Also, to judge by the noise that came regularly from their place, each of them got things done by nagging, shouting, or screaming at the other one until the other one finally gave in and did it—or, more often, slammed out.

Now Mrs. Anderson had slammed out for the final time, or so it seemed to me as I peered down at her from my bedroom window. Solli's medical journals still came to the house, and I read them in the same stubbornly self-torturing way that I listened to Red Sox games on the radio in the evenings, knowing he was listening to them, too. So I could tell at a glance that Mrs. An-

derson had, as Solli would have said, bought it.

Dressed in her standard uniform of too-tight black pants, a sweatshirt, and beat-up running shoes, she lay face up at the end of her own front walk, under the street light. She'd been shot in the chest, and although not much blood was visible, the position of the wound made it almost certain that the bullet had severed her aorta. Even if she'd been on the operating table, they probably couldn't have opened her up fast enough to save her.

By the time I got to her, the sirens were getting louder, and many of the other neighbors had come outside. "Anybody here know CPR?" I yelled.

Nobody did, so I went through the motions myself, trying not to think about it. There are a lot of differences between trying to resuscitate a human being and practicing the same technique on a rubber mannequin, and none of the differences is very pleasant. While I worked, more of the neighbors gathered, murmuring together in shock or babbling in excitement.

"Where is he?" someone asked, which was when I realized who was missing. Just then Harold Anderson drove up in his grey Ford sedan and

scrambled out, his expression horrified.

"My God! What happened? What are you doing to her?" He seized my shoulders, yanked me up, and spun me. "My wife! What have you done to my wife?" Then he saw her more clearly and sank to his knees, sobbing.

A moment later the ambulance and police arrived; the EMT's took over with Mrs. Anderson while the police took statements from several of the neighbors, including me. Many of us had noticed the red convertible cruising the neighborhood recently. And I was not the only one who had heard, after the gunshots, that little engine.

Finally the scene broke up: the ambulance screamed off with Mrs. Anderson in the back, Mr. Anderson left in one of the police cars, and I went home to bed. I couldn't sleep, though, except in brief, fitful snatches during which, instead of trying to resuscitate Mrs. Anderson, I was cutting her open with a scalpel. That was what Solli would have done if he had been here, only he wasn't.

Which was how I happened to be sitting by my bedroom window, staring out into the dawn, when Mr. Anderson came home. The police car let



him out in front of his house and pulled away as he went up the front walk past the single splotch of blood spread out blackish under the street light.

He didn't slow down or even glance at it, continuing instead up the steps to his own front door, where before he went inside I could have sworn I saw him do a little dance.

“Clean as a whistle,” Mike Malley growled around the cigar stub stuck in his plug-ugly face. As a homicide detective, Malley had all the tenacity of a pit bull terrier, only without that canine's comparatively decent disposition. Hell, at least a pit bull *might* not take a bite out of you.

“Guy's gotta witness, everyplace he went. Gotta gun, but it ain't been fired recently. Gotta car, doesn't look nothin' like a red convertible. An' he's gotta story, it checks out nine ways from Sunday. Whadda you care anyhow?” he demanded, eyeing me suspiciously across the toxic waste dump that was his desk in the squad room of the New Haven police department.

On the desk were several dozen grimy manila file folders, six half empty paper coffee cups, a soup bowl full of chewed

cigar butts, and a doughnut someone had begun eating a while ago; say, maybe three months ago. As he scowled at me, he reached for one of the coffee cups.

“Not that one,” I said quickly.

“Huh?” Malley peered into the cup, regarded its dreadful contents with mild interest, and selected another. “So what's your involvement, that's what I wanna know,” he asked again, forcefully.

“Just curiosity.” And the chance to distract myself from the smoking ruins of my own life, I thought but did not add. “In addition to his obvious innocence, I don't suppose Mr. Anderson also has a life insurance payoff coming? A sizable inheritance? Big time mortgage insurance, juicy trust fund, anything like that?”

“The guy,” Malley repeated, “is clean.”

From which I deduced that Anderson did indeed have a major financial windfall coming, only Malley was not going to tell me so because he is a naturally closemouthed type of guy. Also, I had not said the magic words, yet.

“I watched him come home last night. Anderson, I mean.”

Malley's eyebrows, which resembled large, furry animals, shifted minutely. His cigar

stub twitched, and his pudgy fingers tented themselves over his debris-strewn desktop. "So?"

I described what I'd seen: not much, but from the baleful way Malley's bloodshot blue eyes kept regarding me, I knew it was enough. Also, he didn't seem surprised.

When I was finished, he went on watching me for a moment. He was an irritating old flatfoot and as stubborn as they come, but Solli had performed his heart surgery a few years ago and Joey had taught him to play chess during his recuperation. And what with my chronic habit of snooping into things that were none of my business, Malley and I had developed some interests in common, too. Now I guessed he was thinking about Solli and Joey, and about the way they'd filled the gaps in my life like mortar in a shaky foundation.

"Getting along okay?" he asked quietly at last.

"Never better." I looked him in the eye.

He looked back. "Yeah. You're a lousy liar, Charlotte."

"So I've been told." Twice in two days, actually.

"Not like some people we know." Anderson, he meant.

"So you don't believe him, and he did have a motive," I began.

If I could achieve something, anything, I could get back on track; I could finish that damned novel. And if I managed the novel, maybe . . . but there was no point in thinking that. Solli was history. I put the idea away as Malley's frown squelched my enthusiasm further.

"We got no witnesses. We gotta guy with a story so watertight, you could sail it like the *Queen Elizabeth*. And we got six people, including you, swear they heard that little sports car out in the street right afterwards."

That wasn't all he had to say. I waited.

"And," he went on, "I gotta call from your main squeeze. He read in the papers about what happened, figured you'd be around. Hey, he's worried about you, Charlotte, and he sounds real low."

I got up. "He deserves to sound low. And nobody needs to worry about me. Anything else?"

Malley sat at his desk a moment longer, wondering, I imagined, whether or not to hit me again with his spiel about how a person shouldn't let false pride get in the way of an honest-to-god decent relationship, for god's sake, or a person would end up living all alone just like he did, with nothing

but a TV set and a can of beer for company. But since this already described my life quite well, and I suppose it must have showed in my face, he took pity on me and didn't hit me with it.

Instead, he walked me to the door of the squad room, through the babble and clatter of cops all talking, laughing, typing, and complaining. A woman who looked like a hooker brought a woman who didn't into the room and began booking her. A fat man confided that jails gave him palpitations; especially the *insides* of jails, he whispered, but his arresting officer kept marching him. A boy in jeans said he'd done it, yeah, so what, and where was his goddamned phone call?

When we got to the doorway, Malley paused. "Look, you know what you oughtta do, an' I know what you're gonna do, so I got no more to say to you, except this."

Hell, I thought, here's the lecture after all, whether I wanted it or not. But Malley's next words were not the ones I expected.

"Red convertible," he said.

**T**he funeral was two days later, and afterwards Harold Anderson put on a reception at his

house. The neighbors brought cakes and sandwiches, lemonade and cookies, and an urn of coffee. Anderson set up jugs of chilled white wine and some six-packs of beer on ice, then stood at the front door greeting people as they arrived.

He'd already been hitting the wine jug hard by the time I got there. "Hello, Harold," I said, and watched him struggle, trying to focus on me. "I'm so sorry about what's happened."

"Uh-huh. Thanks." He swallowed some of his drink. "She was a great gal. Don' know what I'll do without 'er."

He looked awful: eyes puffy and red-rimmed, his nose red from blowing. As I went by him, he drew a handkerchief from his pocket and honked loudly into it again.

Inside, I found a glass of lemonade and stood by the piano. Someone had made an effort to tidy up the place; newspapers peeped from beneath the sofa where they'd been stashed, and the dining room table bore the streaky marks of a hasty wiping. But dustballs lurked in the corners, and the windows were so dirty they resembled smoked glass; even the vases of flowers on every surface couldn't brighten the atmosphere.

The bouquets weren't even florist's arrangements; they appeared to have been snatched

from the back yard and jammed into coffee cans, Mason jars, and other random receptacles, just any old way. No wonder they looked so cheerless.

"You come here often?"

I turned, annoyed. Something else about those flowers had begun bothering me, and I'd been trying to think what it could be, but that puzzle was nothing compared to the one facing me now: who *was* this creep?

"I'm Robert Anderson, Harry's brother," the fellow said. He pronounced it "brud-da." He was about thirty-five with capped white teeth, a tanning-bed tan, and enough gold jewelry to stock a pawn shop. Wearing an Italian suit, red shirt, white tie, and a pair of black snakeskin loafers, he held a can of beer in one hand and a sandwich in the other.

"Nice spread," he commented. "Too bad about her, though. He is dev-uh-stated. You know 'er?" He peered at me in the same alert, brainless way that a crow does, eyeing a shiny bottlecap.

"Only to say hello to. Who are those people over there?"

Perched on the sofa were two middle-aged women and a man, he in a neat pin-striped blue suit, the women in hats and flowered dresses. All appeared

stunned, grief-struck, and desperately out of place.

"That's her sisters and brother-in-law. Look like stiffers themselves, don't they? Come from some hick town in the Midwest. Poor Harry hadda talk wit' dem. You imagine? Like talkin' to a wall or something. An' those dresses. Uh-uh-gly."

A pretty girl went by carrying a cake plate; I recognized a neighbor's fourteen-year-old daughter. Robert Anderson's eyes practically popped out on springs. If she were a sweet little worm, I could almost hear him thinking, he'd like to be the early bird. Meanwhile, I couldn't decide which bird he resembled most: Heckle or Jekle.

Leaving him standing by the piano, I went over to the group ranged silently on the sofa, offering to bring them lemonade or coffee and telling them how sorry I was about their loss. One of the women looked bitterly at me.

"You're the only one, then, who's sorry at all. Most of these people just think it's an excuse for a party, as far as I can tell. And *he*—"

She meant Anderson, now meandering in, looking sozzled.

"—*he* isn't the least bit sorry. All he can think of to do is drink and eat."



As if to prove her point, Anderson grabbed a plate and began loading it with macaroni salad, sandwiches, and hors d'oeuvres.

"Well," I soothed, trying to put the best face on things, "the neighbors are trying to stay cheerful, and he's probably still in shock." In fact, the party was getting a bit loud, but I couldn't tell them the truth: that no one knew the dead woman very well, or cared much that she was gone.

"Shock," said the man in the pin-striped blue suit. "That's a hot one. You couldn't shock Harry Anderson if you wired him to a twelve-volt battery, stuck his feet in a bucket of water. He never loved her. Married her for her money. We all tried to tell her. She wouldn't listen."

"And later she wouldn't admit we'd been right," one of the sisters chimed in, "so she wouldn't leave him." She stifled a sob. "Now she's dead, and he gets a million dollars."

I blinked. "A *million* . . ."

The three nodded earnestly. "She was rich. We all are. Meat-packing money, from Chicago." The blue-suited man said it simply, not bragging but explaining.

"We flew out today in the company plane," he went on, "just for the funeral. And we'll

fly back in the morning; *he* certainly doesn't want us around."

Across the room, Harold Anderson carried his plate to where his brother stood by the piano. Looking sly, Robert Anderson said something; Harry laughed and began gobbling his snack. In the midst of it he sneezed, mopped his nose, and resumed eating.

"I suppose you've already spoken to the police?" I asked. "Because if you haven't, and you'd like to stay, I could offer you each a room. It's not much," I added, "but it's right across the street, and I would be glad to do it."

"Thanks. But, yes, we've spoken to Lieutenant Malley, and the plane's right down at the airfield. The company has a distributing plant near here. And we have our rooms at a hotel."

I shook hands with Mrs. Anderson's brother-in-law, so spiffy in his neat blue pin-stripes, and repeated my condolences to her sisters. Half an hour later I departed, after casually examining those flowers again.

As I'd thought, they were a mixture of late summer blossoms from the garden: mums, black-eyed susans, and dahlias. But among them were some other, less-cultivated blooms that went a long way toward

explaining Harold Anderson's appearance of grief.

To check my theory, I visited the Andersons' bathroom just before leaving the house. In the medicine chest were bottles of antihistamine pills, the heavy-duty kind available only by prescription. Harold Anderson's name was on the pharmacy labels.

He hadn't been weeping at all. He had hay fever. And the flowers were the notoriously hay fever-causing variety of bright yellow weed known as goldenrod.

Actually, writing is much like typing copy, if you have any idea of what to say and even half an idea of how to say it. If you don't, it's more like Chinese water torture, only the little droplets are drops of your blood.

I couldn't write that damned mystery novel, but I'd promised to, and received an advance check. And since the check represented a big chunk of my income—just how big was a topic I was ignoring—until I finished the damned mystery novel, I had to do something about the project, fast. Otherwise, I would soon be in the ghastly position of having to (shudder) give *back* the advance.

So that evening I sat in front of the word processor again and

bethought myself. My deadline was three months off and I didn't have word one of the mystery novel, but I did have a mystery, and that seemed like progress. Never mind that, the way I felt, having a measurable blood pressure seemed like progress. Now all I needed was a solution to the mystery: how did Harold Anderson kill his wife while making it look as if he didn't?

He had a motive—in fact, he had a million of them. And I'd seen the damning little dance he'd done, the night of the murder. But the red convertible wasn't his car, and the murder weapon wasn't his gun. He had an alibi, and if I knew Mike Malley, Anderson's bank accounts, credit cards, safe deposit boxes, and other possible sources of ready cash had already been examined. If Anderson had paid someone else to kill his wife, Malley would have discovered it by now.

Slowly I began writing down what I knew, putting the events in order and not trying to get fancy about it. My previous books were almost all home-repair guides like *A Heck of a Deck!* and *Fun with Formica*, but I will say one thing about writing home-repair help for the sort of idiot who refuses to go out and hire an expert and get the job done right in the

first place, who would rather smash his fingers with a hammer while hanging an interior door backwards: it teaches clarity, brevity, and the special variety of boneheaded optimism without which no writer can ever hope to succeed.

So by midnight I had filled enough pages to get me out of Bernie's apartment, if I had been in it, and into his stash of whisky. I fixed a drink, carried it back to the living room, and sat drinking it. The house was silent, and I realized with a pang that I'd forgotten to listen to the Red Sox game.

Sometime later the telephone rang once. I was on my feet and halfway across the room before I realized that whoever it was had hung up. I had the notion that it might have been Solli, calling to apologize and at the last minute losing his nerve.

But that was nonsense; he never lost his nerve. I put the phone down, resisting the impulse to call him, and after a while I went up to bed instead and fell into an uneasy sleep.

Not until several hours later did I sit up suddenly, wide awake and filled with the clear, certain knowledge of where that red convertible was right now, and of who had been driving it.

I couldn't call Malley for help; he'd need a search warrant, and by the time he got it the car could be gone. And I certainly couldn't tell him that I was going out in the middle of the night to look for it on my own. He'd only meant me to think about the problem, not take solo action.

So I did it without telling him.

**T**ractor-trailers lined up like children's toys outside the metal Quonset buildings of the meat company. There was nobody around but a guard, sound asleep in front of a television in the office. I moved away from the window, around the back of the building to the little airstrip. At three in the morning, the asphalt shone silvery in the moonlight. Some scrubby trees grew around another, larger metal Quonset with a hangar door.

The only window was too high for me to peer through, so I pulled myself up into one of the junky trees, cursing as I nearly dropped the flashlight. Gasping, I clambered onto what seemed to be a reasonably solid branch and aimed the flash inside.

And there it was: the red convertible, with Illinois plates so a DMV check wouldn't pick it

up. Couple of thousand on the odometer, at most, I was betting; it had been bought new, for a purpose.

I stuck the flashlight under my arm and began climbing down again, stopping suddenly at a faint, warning growl from below. At the base of the tree sat a great big collie, and from the way its lips curled unpleasantly back, I was pretty sure it wasn't Lassie. Naturally, that was when the branch broke.

The dog took a couple of stiff-legged, menacing steps, savoring the moment, I supposed, then halted at the sound of the guard's voice. I untangled myself from the mess of fallen branch, checking for broken bones. The guard was still a couple of hundred feet away and I thought about running, but another look at the dog dissuaded me; his legs were shorter than mine, but he had more of them. Also, he had more teeth.

"Get up," the guard said, aiming a high-intensity flashlight at me. "What the hell you doin'?" He was about twenty years old, with buck teeth and spotty skin, and he squinted at me more in puzzlement than in anger.

"I... uh, wanted to see the airplane?" Maybe if I didn't mention that it was three

o'clock in the morning, he wouldn't remember it.

Unfortunately, he wasn't as dumb as he looked, which would be convenient for him in case he ever wanted to walk and chew gum at the same time, and he marched me over to the office with the now-delighted dog frisking gaily at our heels. I hoped it wasn't because the last time they'd caught a trespasser the dog had gotten a nice fresh leg bone to chew on.

"You sit in here," the kid told me, opening the door to the office. "I gotta call somebody about you."

But not, apparently, in my presence. I stepped inside, and he shut the door behind me, locking it. None of the lights on the telephone console went on, so I guessed there was another phone line somewhere. And he hadn't just booted me off the place, which would have been the normal thing to do with someone who was only looking in a window. All of which meant to me that he'd been given instructions in case anyone came snooping, and wasn't that interesting?

The office itself wasn't very interesting, though. I hate middle-of-the-night TV, all those home-shopping programs and infomercials. The only magazines were *Muscle World* and



*Lifting*, publications I find less fascinating than a ragged cuticle, and there was nothing to eat or drink. So I looked for other ways to amuse myself.

In the third drawer of the desk, whose lock I only had to jiggle a little bit with a straightened paper clip, I found a set of keys and some kind of log book. But as I absently slid the desk drawer shut, the guard's footsteps crunched in the gravel outside. And now the damned drawer was jammed; I must have done something to it when I'd picked the lock. Quickly, I shoved the keys into my pocket and the book into the seat of my jeans, like a kid getting ready for a whipping.

"Okay, you can go," the guard said. "But don't let me catch you around here again."

"Oh, I won't," I said. "You can count on that." I meant it, too, or at least the part about him not catching me.

I backed out of the office. Maybe he wasn't the brightest guy on earth, but I still didn't want him seeing me from behind. What with all those muscle magazines he read, he must have some idea of normal human anatomy, and at the moment my rear end did not resemble it.

As I headed for the street, the guard and the dog stood watching me. When I reached the

sidewalk, the guard went inside again and the dog sauntered off somewhere, and I started running. My car was parked a couple of blocks away, but now I needed it fast because I knew exactly what that guard was about to do.

Yanking the book out of my pants, I tossed it in the back seat and peeled out. It couldn't have taken more than a minute to get back. Pulling over not far from the driveway leading to the Quonsets, I doused the lights and waited. But no one came. After fifteen minutes, I drove in, past the office and around back to the hangar.

The hangar door was open, and the car was gone. Faint marks showed where it had been driven over the airfield's grass onto the asphalt strip. There was a gate in the fence at the far side of the field; the guard had gone that way.

Slowly I circled around and went back the way I'd come, past the hangar and office buildings, toward the street. My adrenaline rush had faded, and all I felt was fatigue coupled with a deep sense of failure. The car wouldn't be registered to its real owner. I had no way of proving that I'd seen it. And this time it would be hidden right: at the bottom of a gravel pit full of water, for instance, or on the far side of a

trip through a crusher, under a pile of other auto carcasses.

The black night sky was muddying with first light, like ink diluted with a little milk. I thought about driving past Solli's place but decided not to. If any car besides his own was in the driveway, I'd just torture myself about it, imagining the gorgeous overnight guest he was entertaining and listing various methods of killing her. Instead I went by Mike Malley's, but no lights were in his windows, only the blue glow of the TV set seeping between the slats of his Venetian blinds. Probably he'd fallen asleep in front of it. The idea made me feel sad.

When I got home, I pulled my clothes off and dropped them and fell into bed. Not until morning when I picked my jeans up off the floor did I remember what I had forgotten, and realize what I'd done. But by then it was too late.

The jeans pocket clinked. "Let's have 'em," said the man in the pin-striped blue suit, standing in the bedroom doorway. "The book, too."

He held out one hand. The other gripped a serviceable-looking little pistol. I supposed it could have been a toy, but I didn't feel like performing the experiment.

I withdrew the pair of keys from the jeans pocket. "How did you get in here?"

He shrugged impatiently, taking a step. "Hey, you aren't the only one knows how to pick a lock. Kid described you, said you must have taken those keys."

I looked down at them. Car keys, of course; a spare set of keys to the Miata. I'd grabbed them only to get them out of the guard's sight, but if I told the cops where I'd gotten them, they'd take it from there; I wouldn't need to prove I'd seen the car.

"There's a lot more money than the million Harry Anderson's going to get, isn't there? Or stock, or something. Money you could only get with her out of the way." I jingled the keys in my hand.

He took another step. "All of the above. Hand 'em over. And where's the damned book?"

"So you sent that kid guard to Chicago," I went on, "had him drive the car back here, and flew out every day in the company plane, just to cruise past the house. That's what's in the book, isn't it? The airfield's log. Somebody was signing the plane in and out."

His eyes narrowed; me and my big mouth. Now he had even more good reasons to kill me. Still, on the theory that

when you are facing disaster, you might just as well postpone it, I kept talking.

"The red convertible was to make people think Harry Anderson was setting up some kind of decoy, maybe along with his creepy brother, to divert attention from the real murder vehicle. But it was you and the Miata, all along. And on the fourth night . . . but how did you know she would be outside? It was awfully late."

He looked pitying. "I called her on the telephone, said I had to see her in person about family business. Told her to meet me at the end of the walk, I'd pick her up. Not that it makes any difference to you, any more. Too bad you're so nosy."

Right, and so ill-equipped; *where* were the rocket launchers and machine guns, now when I really need them?

The blue-suited man took a final, menacing step. "Give me those keys," he said.

So I did, gripped between my middle and index fingers, down the side of his left cheek. While I did that, I kicked him so hard between the legs that even his long-dead ancestors felt it, and he fell satisfyingly to the floor in a writhing heap.

Then of course I couldn't find anything to tie him up with, and he was beginning to get his wind back, so I tapped him on

the skull with the butt of his gun, sending him off to dreamland just long enough to get him wrapped up in a bed sheet. A couple of bathrobe belts secured the bundle nicely.

Too bad I hadn't thought of those in the first place, but disabling armed thugs in my own bedroom tends to disrupt my reasoning processes, and the result at least proved satisfactory. Finally, I telephoned Mike Malley, who came over at once and proceeded to read me the riot act.

Also, he proceeded to arrest a murderer.

**I**t is astonishing how much confidence an ordinary person can gain, just by capturing a killer.

"You don't mean this, Charlotte," Bernie Holloway said in the low, sorrowful tones he always uses when the dollar signs in his mind's eye begin sprouting wings and he hears them flapping away.

"Bernie," I said firmly, "how much are they paying us for the mystery novel? That is, how much *were* they paying us?"

Bernie named a figure somewhat less than the amount it took to feed, clothe, and house me for three months. The trouble was—and this was the part I had been ignoring—it had already taken six months to

write the thing, and would take three months more, assuming I completed it on deadline. Which I wasn't going to; I wasn't going to finish it at all.

"And how much," I persisted, "for a true-crime book about a guy who murders his sister-in-law and tries to frame her husband and nearly gets away with it? Because," I went on, "the husband is so worried about being suspected on account of he's inheriting money, and everyone knows it's always the husband, anyway, so he does stupid things like pretending to be grieving when he's not?"

Bernie named a figure smaller than the national debt but larger than all mine put together, plus enough to keep me going until I sold the *next* book. Also, Bernie's commission would be larger, since fifteen percent of a bunch of money was more than a similar fraction of not nearly enough, or anyway it was the last time I looked.

Calmly I explained all this on the phone to Bernie, under the admiring gaze of Solli, who was sitting across the room. Tall, blond, and ridiculously handsome, Solli resembled a cross between a rocket scientist and a stunt pilot, with a smile that if it were on the face of a tiger would cause jungle ex-

plorers to draw straws for the privilege of getting eaten up first.

"Oh," said Bernie, brightening as he realized that more money was better than less money, and soon thereafter we hung up.

I turned to Solli, whom I had summoned by the straightforward method of calling him on the telephone and telling him that our fight was stupid and we should quit it.

"Okay," he'd replied immediately, sounding as if he'd been waiting for me to say just that. He'd brought his stuff back: his clothes for the closets, his diplomas and certificates for the walls in his office, even his computer, so now everything was exactly as it had been before.

Almost. I faced him, feeling shy. "You know," I babbled, "he'd probably have gotten away with it if he hadn't used such a complicated plan. Fly in, fly out, fake the log, get rid of the gun. It would have been . . ."

"Kiss," said Solli, getting up.

"Kiss? You mean as in, 'keep it simple, stupid?'"

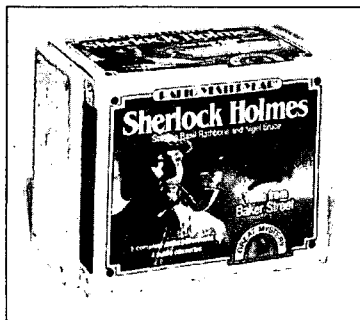
"No," he said. "No, I don't mean that."

"Oh," I replied, suddenly breathless, and as he reached for me, I realized:

I didn't mean that, either.

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FICTION

# Family Business

by Michael Z. Lewin



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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**A**t nine thirty-eight Gina heard footsteps on the stairs. She sat up from the typewriter and ran a hand through her hair. When the door opened, she was ready with business-like attention.

In the old days the door had the words PLEASE KNOCK BEFORE ENTERING lettered at the bottom of the glass, but when the children were finally both at school and Gina became more involved in the business, she pointed out that nobody could come up the stairs without being heard. The Old Man, of course, hadn't changed the door, but one of the first things Angelo had done was get the sign painter in to alter the lettering to NO NEED TO KNOCK BEFORE ENTERING. It was longer and that disturbed the symmetry and the Old Man didn't like it and Gina's idea had been to paint out all the stuff about knocking, but Angelo had gone one better and that was Angelo for you.

When the door opened, a woman looked hesitantly into the room. "Hi," Gina said. "Come in."

The woman was about forty with graying brown hair. Despite the invitation she was still uncertain.

"Is this the detective agency?" she asked. "The private detectives?"

"That's right," Gina said. "Can we help you?"

The woman looked as if she were reminding herself of a decision already made. She stepped in and closed the door behind her carefully. Then she turned to face Gina.

"Is the detective in?"

"Mr. Angelo Lunghi is the head of the agency. I can call him on his car phone if it is an emergency."

"I know all about car phones," the woman said. But it didn't sound like an emergency.

Gina said, "Hey, why don't you sit down and tell me what the problem is."

"You?" the woman said. Her face said, "You? The receptionist?"

"It's all right," Gina said. "As well as being receptionist, secretary, and chief dogsbody here," Gina said, "I am also Mr. Lunghi's wife."

Dinner was served about seven. The Lunghis' usual Thursday evening meal was a hot curry made by Rosetta, Angelo's sister, whose domestic duties doubled with a part-time role as agency bookkeeper. Thursday was a full family evening, which meant that

the Old Man and Mama came down from their apartment and that the two children, David and Marie, were expected to organize their school and social lives in such a way as to be there. Only Salvatore—Angelo's older brother the painter—was not regularly there on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sunday afternoons. But quite often he came, and sometimes he brought one of his models, as he called them. It was not an issue.

Gina's parents lived in another city.

Tonight Angelo rubbed his hands together as he sat down at the table. "Smells good good good," he said.

"Hey, and what's wrong with spaghetti?" the Old Man asked. But it was in a friendly way and he said that sort of thing often. Spaghetti, or some other pasta, was on Sunday.

"Sorry I didn't get back to the office," Angelo said.

"I coped," Gina said.

"You know that guy Hardwick?"

They all knew that guy Hardwick, as various bits of investigation for Hardwick's lawyers had formed the major part of the agency's work for more than four weeks.

"Suddenly Hardwick decides that he *does* remember where he was on the night of April eighteenth."

A groan went up from around the table.

"If he's going to be stupid enough to plead amnesia," the Old Man said, "then he ought to be smart enough to remember that he has amnesia."

Everybody laughed.

"So what came into the office today?" Angelo asked.

"We were pretty busy."

"Good good good," Angelo said and rubbed his hands.

David mimicked his father a moment after. "Gooda gooda gooda."

"Smart-aleck," Angelo said, and swatted David on the top of the head.

David reconstructed his hair. It was all good-humored.

"The main thing was a woman whose son has too much money."

"We should all have such a problem," Mama said.

"But as far as the woman can tell, the son doesn't work for it. He doesn't have a regular job, and he won't explain where it comes from."

Everyone was listening now. Most of the agency's work was for solicitors or involved missing relatives or was related to faithless

spouses, though the Old Man had once had a murder and would only too happily tell the whole thing yet again. But a son with too much money was unusual. They began to vie gently for the chance to ask Gina questions.

Angelo held up his hand and established chairmanship. "Marie."

"How old is the son?" Marie, fourteen, asked.

"Too old for you, my girl," Gina said.

Marie blushed, but smiled. She enjoyed her position as the family heartbreaker.

"The boy is twenty-two."

"And he still lives at home?" Angelo asked.

"You still live at home," the Old Man said.

"Our situation is not an ordinary one," Mama said.

"That's right," David said. They all looked at him. "Our house is bigger than most people's." A pretender for "family wit."

"Twenty-two years of age." The Old Man looked thoughtful. "So what does he do that his mother doesn't know what he does?"

Gina said, "Well, he goes out evenings and nights and then sleeps late into the days. His last job was helping a friend paint a house, but that was more than a year ago." Gina's face suggested that there was some unusual bit of information about the boy that was awaiting the right question.

"He's got boyfriends?" Mama asked.

"No."

"He's not a goddamned artist?" This was the Old Man.

Gina shook her head.

"He's enrolled in night school, and that's why he stays up late," Rosetta, the bookkeeper, offered.

"That's pretty tricky thinking, Auntie Rose," David said with admiration.

Rosetta smiled.

Angelo considered, staring at his wife. "So what's it going to be?" he asked himself aloud. "So what's it going to be?"

"Give up?" Gina asked.

"Never," the Old Man said.

Gina said, "This unemployed layabout kid has a one-year-old car and a car telephone. And when he goes out at night and his mother asks him what he's been doing, all he will say is, 'Driving.'"

"Well well well," Angelo said. He looked around the table. Everyone else was looking at him. It was a matter of who had driving

licenses. And who could be asked to stay up all night following the son.

"We could ask Salvatore," Mama said. She didn't like the Old Man to be out at night. There'd been enough of that, one way and another, when he was younger.

Gina said, "Yes. He'd be interested in the work."

"Work? He wants work, he can come here to work, he wants work. Right, Angelo?"

"Sally knows he's always got a place here if he wants it, Papa," Angelo said. "But he'll never do it."

"Never is a lot of olives," the Old Man said. "But while I'm alive, you're probably right."

"That'll be forever," Marie said, and the Old Man, who doted on his only granddaughter, beamed and said, "There. Now there's a child!"

"I'm glad you like my handiwork, Papa," Gina said.

The Old Man looked at Gina for a moment and then burst into loud laughter. He also liked his daughter-in-law.

"So how's it left with this woman?" Angelo asked.

"It's left I got the car and its plate number and the address, the car phone number, the names, all that."

"You mean we're on tonight?"

"I already called Salvatore. He's happy to do the night, or split shifts if you prefer. I didn't know exactly what you had to do tomorrow about Hardwick."

"Right," Angelo said. "Or we could use Max, or Johnny."

"Outside ops are expensive," Rosetta said.

"Salvatore ain't cheap," Angelo said.

"At least he's in the family," Mama said.

The Old Man said, "What's this you treat me like I couldn't follow a giraffe in a herd of mice? Am I not here or something? I got bad breath from the curry?"

"I haven't forgotten you, Papa," Angelo said.

"You're on shoplifting at Jollys again tomorrow," Gina said.

"We're only going to use Sal tonight," Angelo said. "He can cover it."

"Dad?" David asked.

"Uh-huh?"

"Can I come out with you tonight?"

"I don't know I'm going out."

"Can I go out with Uncle Sal, then?"

"Not on a school night," Gina said.

David said, "I could try to spin you a story about not having school, the teachers having one of those funny days they have or something, but it is a school day tomorrow."

"Is that supposed to be news?" Angelo asked.

"But it's not an important day, Dad. I've got no homework. It's a good day for me to be out the night before."

"Nice try, kid," Angelo said.

"Aw, Dad!"

"If we're still on it tomorrow night, maybe then. A Friday or a Saturday night."

"Or both?"

"We'll see. We'll see." Angelo turned back to Gina. "What's the financial?"

"The mother has some money an aunt left her. She intended to do the house up, but she's too worried about this kid. She's sure he's up to no good."

"What's the name?"

"The boy is Richard Hopkins."

"Record?"

"I rang Charlie. It's mixed. He did five months in a detention center when he was sixteen for some handbag snatches, with two burglaries taken into account. He's been arrested twice again, for burglaries, but the charges were dropped."

"What does she say about if we find he's engaged in criminal activities?" Angelo asked.

"Of course she wants a chance to 'handle' it herself. I told her that really depended on what we found out, if we found out anything."

"Sal will find out tonight whether the kid is going to be easy to tail or whether we'll need a team."

"So you want Sally on all night. No shifts?"

"Not unless he needs it. If he does, then maybe Papa will cover him." Angelo looked at his father. The Old Man looked at his wife. His wife looked at Gina.

"I'll talk to Sally," Gina said, "but we left it that he would do the night unless he heard different."

"So," Angelo said, "you said it was busy. What else came in?"

"Well," Gina said, "there was this woman who found a comb in the back seat of her husband's car. She wanted *him* followed."

"Suddenly it's follow follow follow," Angelo said.

"But she didn't realize how expensive it would be or how long it might take."

"To follow a comb?" David asked.

"She went home to think about just how bad she wants to find out who belongs to the comb."

"You should get paid, all the good marriage advice you give out for free," Angelo said.

"Free free free," David said.

Before eleven the next morning Salvatore dropped in to report to Gina on his night's activities.

"Angelo going to need me again tonight?"

"I don't know yet, Sal," Gina said.

"It's just I got a model booked. I can unbook her if it's important."

"I'll call him on the car phone."

Gina tried to get Angelo, but he wasn't in his car. "Sorry," she said. "I'll try him later."

"I thought it through," Sal said, "and this one it isn't that important I know ahead. Just let me know around dinnertime, eh?"

"You want to come over for dinner tonight?"

"No thanks, kid." In a playful way he said, "You ever considered modeling?"

"Only in my spare time." A joke since everybody acknowledged that Gina never had spare time.

"Get hard up, give me a call."

"You want the money for last night now?"

"Yeah, now you mention it." He laughed. They both knew who was hard up for what.

Dinner was early on a Friday night, which made it easier for David and Marie to go out. Rosetta went out Fridays, too, with her fiancé of the last four years who was agonizing over the morality of divorce, if not necessarily over other moralities. Gina always organized something simple on Fridays, and if it was very busy, they ate at the pub.

Angelo was already in when Gina came home from the office. He had scrubbed some potatoes.

"So what did Sally have to say?" Angelo asked.

Normally they would have waited to talk till mealtime, but with the possibility that David would be riding if Angelo went out, they needed to plan ahead.



"Sally said that Richard Hopkins didn't have a clue, he was being followed and that he should be easy for one car."

"That's something. What did he do?"

"Sal got there about eight. At nine thirty-five Hopkins left his home address alone. He drove downtown and went to a back street cafe called Henry's. Do you know it?"

"That's on Morris Street, isn't it?"

"That's it. Do you know what it is?"

"Give me a clue."

"Stays open all night."

"Cabbies?"

Gina smiled.

Angelo considered the information. "How long was Hopkins there?"

"Only about half an hour. Then drove around till two A.M."

"Just drove around?"

"That's what Sally says. He took down the street names for a while, but the kid didn't stop anywhere. He just drove till eight past two. He might have been making calls from his car phone, but Sally didn't think so."

"If he did, who to?"

Gina shrugged.

"And what happened then?"

"He picked up a prostitute."

"I see."

"Dropped her off again at two thirty-two."

"He may have too much money, but he's a man of simple tastes, eh?"

"And then he went home," Gina said.

"Hmmm."

"His mother said he usually stays out till five or six, so this probably wasn't typical. I don't know what he does during the days. It was the evenings and nights that really worried her, and I told her that's what we would concentrate on."

"I think we stick at that for the time being. What she's worried about is how he makes his money, not how he spends it."

Gina nodded.

"I'll take him tonight. Maybe Sally again tomorrow."

"And David?"

They looked at each other. Angelo said, "I more or less promised him."

Angelo and David arrived at Hopkins' house at six thirty. Their car was well stocked for a long night. Thermos flasks, cassette tapes, food, blankets. Specimen bottles in case of emergency. David had been out before and knew the routine.

"Which car is it, Dad?"

"The Rover across the street. Under the light."

"I see."

"How're your eyes these days, son? Can you read the plate?"

David read the plate. Then he said, "Granddad told Mom that he wanted to come along tonight."

"She didn't say anything to me."

"I think Gran talked him out of it."

"More likely there's a private eye film on the telly. He loves to pick holes in the stories."

"Coincidences like that don't happen in real life," David said, mimicking his grandfather.

Angelo smiled. "That's it."

"Did you ever think of being something other than a private detective, Dad?"

"I didn't get much choice once Uncle Sal went to art school."

"Do you mind?"

"I don't think about it."

"What else would you have wanted to do?"

Angelo considered. "I don't know."

"A painter like Uncle Sal?"

"You've got to be able to draw," he said.

"Uncle Sal's stuff doesn't look like you have to draw so well."

"You've got to be able to draw to make it look like you can't," Angelo said.

"Oh," David said. Then, "What time do you think this Hopkins guy is going to come out of his house?"

"Not for a while yet," Angelo said. "He didn't go out till nine thirty last night."

Three minutes later, at seven twenty-two, Richard Hopkins left his mother's house and got into his car.

"Write it down," Angelo said to David as he started his car.

David took up the clipboard and wrote a note of the time that they had begun the active phase of their surveillance.

\*

Hopkins' night began much as the previous night had begun. He drove to Henry's Cafe, parked, and went in.

The windows of the cafe were large and clear enough that Hopkins could be seen as he went to the counter, placed an order, and then moved to a table where another man already sat. Hopkins had entered the cafe at seven forty-nine.

The man behind the counter carried a tray to Hopkins at seven fifty-three. The man sitting with Hopkins rose and left the cafe at seven fifty-nine. This man got into one of the taxis up the street.

"Field glasses," Angelo said with some urgency, but David already had the large-lens binoculars out of the case and resting on the dash for support.

When the man pulled his taxi into the road, David read out the vehicle's license plate number and the name of the taxi company. Angelo recorded these on the clipboard sheet.

The large-lens binoculars intensified light from dim images. It was as if one's eyes were suddenly five times as big: more light from the object was caught.

At eight oh-six Angelo took some money from his coin purse. "What say you get in and ask for a couple of doughnuts?"

"Really?"

"See whether Hopkins is talking to anybody else, but if he gets up to leave, just walk back to the car."

"Okay, Dad."

"And don't tell your mother."

David winked and put out his hand for the money.

By eight thirteen he was back in the car. "Hopkins isn't talking to anybody else. What he's got left is some chips on his plate, and he took a drink from whatever he had a cup of."

Angelo began to speak, but David interrupted him. "There was a mirror behind the counter," he said. "I watched him in that."

"Good boy," he said. Then, "Hang on. I think we're rolling."

Hopkins had risen from his table and was walking toward the cafe door.

"Got a time for me, Dad?" David asked.

Hopkins drove to a petrol station. Angelo swung the car into a street on the opposite side of the road and turned around, ready to go in whichever direction Hopkins chose after his stop.

Hopkins filled his Rover. David practiced with the binoculars

and saw that the car had taken eight point three gallons.

Angelo wrote it down.

Hopkins left the petrol station and drove around aimlessly for about half an hour. Then, at nine oh-two, Hopkins pulled over to the side of the road suddenly. Angelo had to drive past him. David watched what was happening in the Rover.

"It looks like he's talking on the phone, Dad," David said.

Angelo again used a side street and turned around quickly. They could just make out Hopkins' car. After another minute, Hopkins put the phone away and made a squealing U-turn. Angelo followed. Already it was obvious that the car was being driven in a much more purposeful manner than before. This went on for thirteen minutes as they followed the Rover across town. Then suddenly Hopkins slowed down. Taking a chance, Angelo—who felt he was lucky still to be with the car—slowed down, too, rather than pass it as he had done the time before.

Hopkins did not *seem* to notice them.

"If he'd been looking for us," Angelo said to his quiet son, "he'd have spotted us a dozen times already."

Hopkins appeared instead to be intent on finding a particular house. After a few moments of slow cruising, he parked. Angelo pulled past him and parked on the other side of the street.

"Stay here and stay low," he said to David.

Angelo got out of the car. As he pretended to lock the vehicle door, he saw which way Hopkins had turned. Angelo walked in the other direction and continued till he found a telephone pole. He dropped into its shadow and turned back to watch Hopkins.

Hopkins had not moved far. For several seconds he studied the front of a pebble-dashed house. Then he began to walk. Angelo followed at a distance and was not seen.

Hopkins walked around the block. When he got to the front of the house again, he walked up the path and then through a passageway between the house and its garage.

Angelo slipped back to his car where David waited eagerly.

"What's up, Dad?"

"I think he's committing a burglary," Angelo said. "If I had to guess, that would be it." He started his car.

"Where we going?"

"I want to get in a better position in case he leaves fast."

Angelo turned around in the street and reparked several yards behind Hopkins' Rover.

They waited for nearly an hour, but eventually Hopkins reappeared. He carried two suitcases and was not in any apparent hurry.

"A cool son of a bitch," Angelo said tensely.

David was pleased that his father used such language with him. Gina would have disapproved.

Hopkins did not have to unlock his boot. A push of a button and the lid flew up. In a moment the cases were in and the lid back down. Hopkins got into his car then, and still without seeming to rush, he drove away.

"What do we do now, Dad?"

"Follow follow follow," Angelo said. He pulled out to do just that, but he was in deep thought.

**A**ngelo and David made for home when Hopkins finally returned to his mother's house, parked, and went in. David, who knew he had been along for something unusual, said he was too excited to sleep. But when Angelo sent him to bed, he went with a yawn, not a murmur. He was too tired to be too excited to sleep.

Angelo left a note on the kitchen table for Gina to wake him at eight and to get the Old Man down. On another day Rosetta would have been summoned, but she stayed out every other Friday night and did not return on Saturday until noon.

At eight twenty-two, when everyone was together and Angelo had had a cup of tea, he said, "It's tough to know exactly what to do."

He explained what they had seen and done. That Hopkins had pulled up to use his car phone a second time and had driven to look for and find a second address after that. But something had perhaps looked wrong to him. He had not stayed long and had not gone onto the property at the second address.

"And then," Angelo said, "cool as can be, he drives back to Henry's and has some more food. This is at four twelve in the morning. He's got two suitcases of stolen goods in the boot of his car and he still hasn't locked it because when he finally went back to his mother's house, he locked it before he went inside. We have to decide what to do."

"What does the client want you to do?" the Old Man asked.

Gina said, "She said she wanted to know if there was anything criminal before we told the police."

"How much money have you had?" the Old Man asked.

"Fee for three nights, but no expenses."

"She seem flush?"

"She didn't hesitate writing the check," Gina said.

"Our responsibility is to her," the Old Man said.

"I am tempted to follow Hopkins this morning," Angelo said. "To find out what he does with it all. He must be going to take it to a fence today."

"Who's paying you to do that?" the Old Man asked. "Suddenly you're working on commission from the police?"

"I know I know I know, Papa," Angelo said. "All I said was that I am tempted. How often do we get something like this?"

"Not often, but so what?"

"Who paid you to solve the murder of Norman Stiles?"

"At least I was being paid to check a suspect's alibi. At least I was being paid."

"You never got paid."

"So at least I was owed," the Old Man said with dignity.

"I know, I know, I know," Angelo said. "But I am still tempted."

"I think we should contact Mrs. Hopkins," Gina said. "She is the client."

The Old Man looked at Gina fondly.

"I was also tempted to try to look in the boot while Hopkins was in Henry's."

"Not with David there!"

"But Hopkins parked right in front of the cafe second time."

They sat quietly for a moment. "We have an obligation to the client," Angelo said. "And an obligation to the police. But if it came to it, I think I could deal with the police."

At the time they didn't ask him what he meant by that.

Instead, Gina said, "How tired are you?"

"I'm all right."

"This is what we do," Gina said. "We drive two cars to the Hopkinses'. I go up to the door to see if I can talk to Mrs. Hopkins myself. You wait outside and you follow the son if he goes anywhere. Papa mans the office."

"Who's paying, he goes anywhere?" the Old Man demanded again.

"Maybe if we recover what's in the suitcases the owners will pay us," Gina said.

\*



Gina and Angelo arrived at nine forty-nine. Before Gina went in, Angelo slipped into her passenger seat. "I'm not that happy about you going in cold," Angelo said.

"I'll be all right."

He raised his eyebrows. "Tell her you're there only as a courtesy. We have to tell the police. We have no choice."

She nodded and got out.

But Angelo was still tempted to let Hopkins have a little rope and to see where he would take the suitcases.

In the end, however, stronger forces determined his actions.

Gina went to the door of the house at nine fifty-four. She was admitted to the house at nine fifty-five by Mrs. Hopkins.

By ten fifteen Angelo, who was tired anyway, was tired of waiting. He sorely wished he had put a wire on her. Or at least a call device, a button to be pushed in case of emergency. They had relied too much on the assumption that the young Hopkins' routine of sleeping late would be followed. Angelo felt that he had put Gina at risk. He began to think that he should go to the house himself.

Having begun to think that, he began to decide to do it.

He got out of his car. He walked toward the house. He stood by the Rover. Gina did not emerge.

Angelo looked at the house. Then he began to walk up the path.

Suddenly the front door burst open. Richard Hopkins ran out.

Angelo froze. He was in no man's land. He couldn't get back to his own car to follow without its being obvious. And Gina still did not appear.

So Angelo tackled Hopkins as the young man ran by.

The act was a surprise to both of them. But with Hopkins on the ground, Angelo knew enough to be able to keep him there.

The young man swore and spluttered and made inquiries as to what Angelo thought he was doing. But Angelo ignored him, and fretted because all he could do was hold Hopkins immobile when what he wanted to do was go into the house to make sure Gina was all right.

Why had Hopkins come out running? What had he done? What had happened to the two women inside?

**R**osetta served Sunday dinner at two o'clock sharp. It was an even numbered Sunday in the month, so her "fiancé," Walter, was in attendance. Salvatore was there, too, having brought a model named Carol.

"This is my father," Sal said, introducing her to the Old Man. "And my mother. And this is Carol. She models for me."

"Hello," Mama said tersely. Carol didn't *look* like a potential wife.

"Welcome and make yourself at home," the Old Man said. He shook Carol's hand warmly.

"My niece and nephew, Marie and David."

"Hello."

"Hello."

"Hello."

"Gina you met at the door. That's Rosetta behind the salad bowl and Walter next to her. And the man with the black eye is my brother Angelo. He's about to tell us how he got it."

Carol exchanged greetings with the rest of the family, and everyone sat down.

In fact the one thing that Angelo didn't remember was when he had been hit in the eye. "I was just worried that the creep had done something to my Gina."

Gina said, "The boy's mother was crying. I was trying to console her. She was a client after all."

"But I didn't know."

"No."

"So there I was sitting on this kid," Angelo began.

"Tricky," the Old Man said. "Very tricky."

"I thought I had him bang to rights," Angelo said. "I thought he had two suitcases of stolen goods locked in the boot of his car. I had seen him put them there. I had seen him lock it. I thought . . ."

"But it was hours later."

"I know, I know, I know. Nobody was more surprised than me when the police opened the boot and it was flaming empty."

"That was a very tense moment," Gina agreed.

"I was thinking, I'm going to go down for GBH," Angelo said. He paused to look around the room.

"So come on," Salvatore said. "Get on with it. How come you're here and smiling instead of being without bail because you're a menace to society?"

Gina said, "My Angelo did say before we went out that he thought he could deal with the police."

Angelo said, "I was bothered by this Hopkins' car telephone."

"He didn't use it the night I was out," Sal said.

"But with David and me . . ." Angelo turned to David, who beamed at the guest. "With David and me he used it twice. Then each time he goes to a house somewhere. First time it's suitcases. Second time nothing. But it bothered me. And then I'm thinking, each night he's down at this taxi drivers' cafe. First night he eats alone. Second night he eats with a cabby. You see, the problem about the phone calls is, who is he talking to?"

"So my boy puts two and two together," the Old Man said to Carol proudly.

"Sometimes he gets twenty-two," David said.

"But this time I am lucky," Angelo said.

"Who was he talking to?" Salvatore asked.

"I decided that Hopkins was working with a taxi driver. The driver picked up fares from a house. He noticed whether they locked up when they left, whether it looked empty. Then, after he dropped the fares, he telephoned Hopkins. Gave him the address. Hopkins went to the address and burgled it if he thought it was right."

"Gosh," Carol said.

"Some nights the driver got no appropriate fares or maybe he was just off work—that's what I think happened your night, Sal."

Salvatore nodded.

"But Friday night they had a big hit. The police figured there was nearly three grand's worth in the suitcases. When they recovered them from the cabby. Who drove home at the end of his shift via Hopkins' house. Duplicate key to Hopkins' boot. Takes the cases at six in the morning. Who sees?"

"They were still in his taxi when the police got there," Gina said.

"And how did you know who the taxi driver was?" Carol asked.

"Ah, that was down to David," Angelo said. "He was the one who spotted the man's license plate when he went on shift. A word with his dispatcher, and he was dispatched."

"All in a night's work, ma'am," David said.

Carol smiled.

"The police say they think it will resolve about forty outstanding burglaries," Gina said.

"Well done, brother," Salvatore said.

"Thanks."

"Are people ready to eat?" Rosetta asked.

"So what's today?" the Old Man asked.

"Linguini, with my special sauce," Rosetta said.

"That's Italian for 'little tongues,' " the Old Man said.

"Oh," Carol said.

"So," the Old Man said to Rosetta, "what's wrong with some chili?"

There was a quiet groan from several places around the table.

"A family joke," Salvatore explained.

"You know, Carol," the Old Man said, "one time, one time only, I was involved in an actual *murder* case."

"Gosh," Carol said.

"The man's name was Norman Stiles and he was a smalltime bookmaker."

A second, louder groan was heard. But not by the Old Man.



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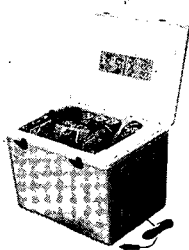
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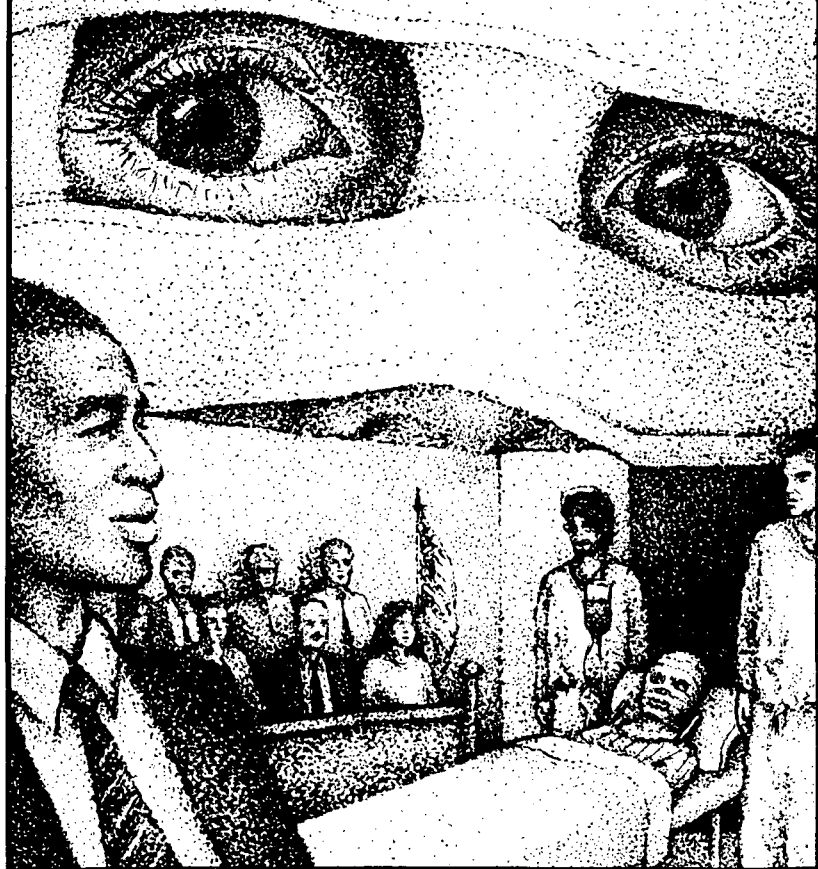


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FICTION

# THE SATISFIED VICTIM

by Morris Hershman



*Illustration by Mark Penta*

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**T**hey're still telling the story in criminal hangouts from coast to coast and as far away as Hawaii and Alaska, for that matter. One hood will turn to another one and say something like:

"Did you hear about the big five hundred grand steal in New Orleans?"

And if the other one has been out of touch for awhile he's likely to answer, "No, not a thing. Who did the job?"

"An amateur did it, and this guy not only got away, but the cops know all about it and can't put a finger on him." By this time the first hood is laughing fit to kill.

"An amateur did all this? How, for Pete's sake?"

Well now, that's quite a yarn. There's no use talking too much about Freddie's past. He was an honest guy with a few crooks as friends in those days, and people say that he'd carry a grudge for a long time and that he'd go to any amount of trouble to get even. He never cared how long it took or what he had to do for his revenge.

And then one day he really got mad.

Don't ask me why he became so sore at the Craven Insurance Company, Inc., but he did. He went around muttering against them for weeks. A guy once told me he used to work there, and

I wouldn't be surprised. Somebody who recently saw him in Acapulco, where he spends most of his time these days, told me that Freddie still turns a little pink around the gills when somebody mentions Craven to him. For hours afterward, he told this fellow who saw him, champagne tastes like ashes in his mouth.

Well, what happened is that Freddie got even in a systematic way. He asked Gus Kaden-sky, for a start, how to fake an accident. Gus liked Freddie, so Gus talked. Then Freddie asked him how you fake being an accident victim and Gus said it's a matter of getting the right doctor, the right lawyer, and sometimes even the right judge. The jury will always pay money to an accident victim on the notion that they're only robbing an insurance company.

This accident happened three days later in a little street just off Bourbon. (In New Orleans, for some reason, every street is identified sooner or later as being just off Bourbon.) Freddie "happened" to be "run over" by a car owned by somebody who was insured with Craven.

Eventually—and that's no joke because trials are always being delayed—the case comes to trial and Freddie shows in a stretcher, flat on his back. It almost goes without saying

that his whole head is bandaged except for eyes, mouth, and nostrils. Four attendants sit with him, and every so often, when the insurance company lawyer starts to make a point, for instance, an attendant goes out and comes back with a glass of cloudy water for Freddie, who gulps it down noisily. The other lawyer winces.

The trial itself was a walk-over, somebody once told me. Freddie's lawyer was a guy named Clarence Darrow Passy, and nobody ever asked him for the right time without checking it immediately just afterwards. He was smooth as satin, sincere as a prisoner going up before the parole board, and no more crooked than that prisoner had been before landing on the inside. Clarence had learned the guiding principle of all lawyers: "Postpone the case." Insurance outfit attorneys who had fought adjournments on cases of his from the day out of law school, tried those same cases on the day before retirement. Clarence Darrow Passy rarely went to trial before five years had elapsed if he was representing a defendant. As attorney for plaintiff, though, his speed was formidable.

The opposition lawyer this time was Roscoe Ettinger. Ros-

coe may not have been betting against himself, but he must have guessed he couldn't win. All he had to do was look at the jury's sympathetic eyes resting on Freddie Shaftel, and he knew that the game was lost. What's more, he was convinced that his own experts had been bought off, because all their reports were unfavorable. Nobody could be as beaten up as Freddie looked.

Somehow he managed to get Freddie and his lawyer alone in a private room. He told Freddie:

"Look here, I know this is a fake and you're trying to get back at Craven because we fired you arbitrarily. But I can tell you this, you certainly won't get away with it."

Freddie groaned. Clarence Darrow Passy chuckled and said:

"The jury will give us perhaps a million, and may even force some additional monies on my unfortunate client."

Roscoe Ettinger ignored him. "I'll tell you this, Freddie: after the verdict you'll be watched very carefully. Those bandages are phony, and when you're up and around again, as you'll have to be in a little while, Craven will sue to get back every cent and put you in prison besides."

Freddie groaned. He wasn't much of a talker even when he behaved naturally.

Roscoe Ettinger went out to accept the losing verdict gracefully, which he wasn't able to do well in spite of the fact that no money was coming from his pocket. He was simply a guy who hated to lose.

As he'd sworn to do, Roscoe Ettinger assigned a detective agency to follow Freddie from then on. If Freddie went to a hospital, the detectives would get all the records as well as statements from doctors and nurses. What was more, Roscoe Ettinger assigned another team of detectives to keep tabs on the first detectives, in case anybody was bought by the opposition.

The first report from the first agency said: "Subject has booked tickets on an airplane for Los Angeles."

Roscoe told each agency to have Freddie Shaftel and his attendants followed. So far, so good. At this point, as a matter of fact, everybody's plans were working out: the detectives', Ettinger's, and, above all, Freddie's.

Well, Freddie's groans on the airplane kept all the passengers awake, including the two teams of detectives. At Los Angeles International Airport, Freddie and his stretcher bear-

ers headed for a good hotel and registered as F. Shaftel and party. Party was the word. Gallons of liquor must have been sent up to that room before the night was over. No women, though. Freddie and his group were being careful, just in case two teams of detectives happened to be on their track.

Roscoe Ettinger's next report came to him by phone in the middle of the following afternoon.

"Subject has won," said a detective from the first agency. He sighed. "We're getting off the case because there's no alternative."

"He couldn't win, he couldn't win," Ettinger said determinedly, a crusader watching the heathen slip away from him. "Impossible."

"No, it isn't. Early this morning his bunch took him to a stadium, and when me and my associate got inside there was a lot of singing. Then we saw the subject and the attendants at one end of a long line. We waited and waited, not seeing what was happening on stage till he got there. Then we saw—" and the detective breathed deeply "—Amos Corder himself."

"Who?"

"Amos Corder! There was a bunch of singers back of him, and just like he does on televi-

sion he asked the subject's name and the subject said, 'Frederick Shaftel.'

"And Amos Corder said, 'Brother Shaftel, you were paralyzed in an automobile accident, isn't that what your associates stated to me?'"

"'Yes,' the subject said. 'Yes, Brother Amos.'

"'But you *believe*,' Amos Corder said, just like on television. 'Your belief can make you well again.'

"'Yes, yes, brother, I believe,' Shaftel said.

"And Amos Corder said, 'You're healed!,' and hit Shaftel a tremendous wallop on the head. And Shaftel got up off the stretcher and started to walk around and jump in the air and yell, 'I'm healed, I'm healed!'"

"A faith healer!" Roscoe Ettinger felt sick as he tried to imagine arguing in front of a packed New Orleans courtroom that a well-known faith healer had been victimized, that a miracle seen in public hadn't happened. He shuddered strongly. "Come back home right away."

As soon as he hung up, his secretary buzzed him. "There's a phone call from Los Angeles. It's from Mr. Galbraith of the Peerless Detective Agency."

"Never mind," Roscoe said wearily.

When the secretary stepped into his office later on, she found her boss sitting with head in hands and groaning softly.

FICTION

# The Colsum Painting

by Isak Romun



Illustration by Judith Holman

**M**urder is not a big item these days, there's so much of it. Not a big item even in sleepy Paulsburg. But when it involves people with a certain local celebrity, the *Advance-Indicator* usually moves the copy from the City News section to a position close to the front page, probably above the fold. That's where my sister Maureen found out about the death—the particularly brutal death—of Lisbeth LeBoyd.

"You interviewed them, didn't you, Oscar?"

I answered, "As I've interviewed most of the luminaries this town has offered up."

"Well, any ideas?"

"Let me read it."

Maureen handed me the paper and left for the kitchen to serve the dessert, bring it in along with the tea.

I scanned the story, a fairly straightforward account. Somewhere between seven and ten thirty P.M. the previous night, Lisbeth LeBoyd was beaten to death in the vast living room of the house she shared with her husband, novelist and Pulitzer runner-up Nicol LeBoyd. The police were alerted by a call from husband Nicol phoning from Fitzburg, a Paulsburg-sized city about one hundred fifty miles away. LeBoyd had been in Fitzburg at his ex-wife

Maryanne's place discussing some business. He'd been phoning present-wife Lisbeth off and on throughout the evening. And getting the answering machine each time. But no Lisbeth. He was worried. He asked the police to enter the house, told them where to find the hidden key over the kitchen door. The cops went to the house and found the dead and bloodied Lisbeth LeBoyd. And an empty picture frame. I could guess at what had been in that picture frame.

"What do you think?" Maureen asked.

I looked up at her. "I think I better call Brosnan."

Brosnan flipped open his notebook. "Here's what I got," he said, "that didn't show up in the news piece in your paper. Some of it because I didn't know it until LeBoyd got back to town just after noon today."

"Just after noon? Nice of him to make it."

"Well, there's a reason for that. His ex-wife called. Said he went into shock when he got a return call from us telling what we found at his house. She and her boyfriend took LeBoyd to a local emergency room. They gave him something and told him to rest. She, the ex, said he'd be on the road soon's he

stopped shaking. I didn't push it."

Brosnan had come over to the house. His bulk dominated the dining room table—the dining room, for that matter. I sat across from him. Occasionally, he'd drink some ginger ale from a glass in front of him. Ginger ale was his case drink; he preferred beer, but not when he was on a case. Maureen always kept both in the refrigerator to fit either circumstance. I was still drinking tea. Maureen hovered above us, offering re-fills, urging on Brosnan—without too much resistance—a slice of apple pie, and trying to hear as much as she could without seeming to do so.

Brosnan began going down his notebook scribbles, flipping the pages with the delicacy of a gorilla peeling bananas. "It looks like robbery, and Lisbeth LeBoyd was killed in the course of its commission. She must of come on whoever it was broke in. Kitchen door glass broken. Intruder reached in, unlocked the door, let himself in. A valuable painting stolen. A portrait of LeBoyd and his ex. He showed me a photo. It didn't look much like a portrait of anyone. You know, one of those jobs that shows the soul of the pictured and forgets all about what they really look like. Le-Boyd says the value is around

fifty, sixty thousand. Not exactly the *Mona Lisa*, but a temptation, I suppose."

"John Colsum."

Brosnan took his eyes away from the notes. "Right, the artist. Friend of the family. How did you know? Oh yeah, you interviewed the LeBoyd's."

"It wasn't a family," I put in.

"Hah?"

"No child."

"Ah, yes."

I wondered how much I should tell Brosnan about Colsum—and about the LeBoyd's, husband and wives. Colsum had been more to Nicol LeBoyd and his first wife Maryanne than just a "friend of the family." It was pretty clear to me from my interview with Lisbeth and Nicol that Maryanne and John Colsum had been lovers. At least that's the impression I picked up. That interview, with Lisbeth providing most of the input, crackled with hidden animosities, glossed-over grudges, the kind of stuff that didn't get into my writeup. I came away with an added impression, put there by Lisbeth and undenied by an undiscerning or uncaring Nicol. Colsum had been close to Nicol, too. At the same time the artist was Maryanne's lover.

I tended to believe Lisbeth, though her language was a good deal less than direct. I had



only to glance at Colsum's portrayal of Nicol and Maryanne to clinch this belief. In my memory of the painting, I could see more in it than Brosnan, who, after all, had only a photo from which to work. There was intimacy involved in the rendering of both subjects, an intimacy that comes from more than a workaday relationship between portrayer and portrayed. The degree of artistic application was equal for each subject. Equal, with all the tension equality implies. Made you think, give credence to Lisbeth's dark but brightly delivered hints.

Colsum gave the portrait to LeBoyd and his first wife. At the time of the divorce, ownership of the portrait was, through mutual and amicable agreement, shared. Six months at his place, six months at Maryanne's. Maryanne asked for nothing more. Including her share in the literary journal she and Nicol founded. Not that a share of *Spartacus* amounted to much. In the ten years of the publication's existence, it had moved from regional and state to national stature without, at the same time, attaining fiscal stability. Nicol carried on alone with the journal until, a year or so after the divorce, he married Lisbeth. Lisbeth, a symbolist poet (whatever that is!) of some

renown, moved easily into the *Spartacus* co-editorship vacated by Maryanne.

I wrote above that the agreement over the Colsum portrait was amicable. The whole divorce procedure appeared amicable. More than that, it was loving. As if parting were a due and natural development in the course of Nicol and Maryanne LeBoyd's relationship, a relationship in which divorce was a phase, not an end. Feelings, emotions were not involved, just the need to move on to something else, to some other plane. In short, Nicol and Maryanne had parted friends. More than that, they parted lovers—meaning they still loved each other. Maryanne left town, meandered to Fitzburg, and snugly quartered herself there with a series of live-in boyfriends. Like LeBoyd, all were writers.

John Colsum died some time before all this. Our contemporary realization of a romantic end: a general wearing away brought on by drugs, booze, diseased relationships. The value of his work, increasing slowly while he was alive, skyrocketed with his death. Thus, the high tag on the portrait *Nicol and Maryanne*.

"What are you thinking?" Brosnan's rough voice startled me.

I answered, "LeBoyd killed her. He came home. The empty frame set him off. She'd sold the painting, the link he had with both Maryanne and John Colsum. Without thinking, he went at her. Beat her to death, perhaps without realizing what he was doing. Then took off, covering his tracks by a phony call to you."

"Well, she *was* done in with fists. No murder weapon. The cruelest death I know. The body resists. Getting to that last sock takes a long time. And all that time is filled with pain. What makes you think she sold it?"

"Something she said to which he reacted sharply. Really at odds with his general passivity during most of the interview. She looked up at the portrait and said something like, 'That would solve our problems.' He got very upset about this, very upset, and she had to calm him down, tell him she'd never sell it. But I'll bet hard coin she did, and sealed her death."

I saw puzzlement on Brosnan's face. I went on.

"It was *Spartacus*, their literary magazine. It was successful. Its stories were regularly picked up for the O. Henry and Best American Short Stories anthologies. Still, without a wealthy patron or academic sponsorship, it was a hand-to-

mouth affair. They were between grants, the till was empty. That was the idea of my article, to publicize the journal's need. Announce the establishment of a *Spartacus* fund. Fish around for any loose change in the community. Culture-starved Paulsburg couldn't afford to lose *Spartacus*. But the portrait could have been a quick fix to fill the arid space before the fund took hold or new grant money showed up. The picture'd bring enough for five or six more months of operation."

"What gives you that idea?" Brosnan asked.

"What idea?"

"That he killed her."

"I just explained. You don't agree?"

"I'm forced not to. First, they were in for a state grant on top of one from NEA. What's that?"

"National Endowment for the Arts. That doesn't mean they were going to get the grants. Or get them, any time soon."

"Yeah. Next, Nicol LeBoyd is tightly alibied for the period of the killing."

"Whose alibi?"

"His ex-wife's."

"Hah!" I snorted.

"Maryanne swears LeBoyd was in Fitzburg long before seven, long after ten thirty.

The police up there got her statement. It's en route to me."

"Seven to ten thirty. Did the M.E. fix those times?"

"No." Brosnan looked down at his notes. "Nicol LeBoyd's call to us was around ten twenty. Black-and-white there by ten thirty. Before that, Le-Boyd's been calling his home. No Lisbeth. The M.E. may tighten up the period, but that won't put LeBoyd on the hook."

"Ten thirty, fine. What about seven?"

Brosnan consulted the notebook again. "Delivery to Le-Boyd residence by Larrido's Cleaners little before seven. One of LeBoyd's blazers, I think. Neighbor saw delivery truck. Larrido's confirms delivery, acceptance by Lisbeth LeBoyd." He flipped the notebook shut and put it away, rose from the table, pushed his chair in. "Goodnight to you, then." He moved off toward the entrance hall. "Thanks for the pie, Maureen."

"Humor me," I called out to Brosnan's back.

He asked without turning around, "How, Monahan?"

There was undue clattering of dishes as Maureen cleared the table. She didn't like people to call me by my last name—her maiden name. I spoke above the clatter.

"Check the galleries. See if one of them bought the Colsum painting from Lisbeth. You may have to do that anyway. Just do it now instead of later."

Brosnan turned then. He looked as if he were giving my request some thought. "I see. If it's at a gallery, we're saved the trouble of looking for a killer-crook. We just have to look for a killer."

"If it's at a gallery, you can do some heavy work demolishing Nicol LeBoyd's alibi."

"And if it's not at a gallery, you promise to stop playing dining room detective?"

"Deal."

**B**rosnan called me at the paper early afternoon the next day. "Turn in your gun and badge, Monahan." Cop humor.

"You didn't find the gallery?"

"There is no gallery with the Colsum painting. Not here in Paulsburg. Not anywhere in the Tri-City area. Not in the surrounding counties. Not in the capital, either. We checked all the galleries in those places. Anywhere else, the time window wouldn't be right to offer, strike a deal, and ship. Or deliver or pick up."

"So you're saying it's not LeBoyd," I said.

"Believe me, Oscar," Brosnan replied, "it'd overjoy me if

it was him. That would make things so much easier. Now I've got to send my people all over town checking snitches, pulling in fences, looking into the background of Larrido's delivery-man, see who in the area has a record of art thefts and then, from among them separating the bruisers from those who just like to lift the stuff. But what I'd like to do is find the picture. Find the picture, find the killer."

"What are your chances of that?"

"Marginal to nil." Brosnan sighed audibly into his receiver. "First off, news of the killing is going to scare off the fences and those shadowy dealers whose clients have display halls in their basements. These clients themselves may be contacted by the killer. And if there's a sale, it's like dropping Colsum's painting into the old bottomless well."

"I was so sure."

"Don't feel bad. LeBoyd was my favorite until all the facts were in. But except for my spouse-is-first-suspect policy, there was nothing about him that would make him unduly suspicious."

"Did you check his hands?"

"No bruises, no cuts. If he did it, he wore gloves."

"Heavy driving gloves."

"Maybe. But as I said, nothing about him made me suspicious. Just the opposite."

"What's that mean?"

"I suppose it means the way he acted. He seemed abstracted, as if he were traveling at a slower speed than us. He was convincingly mournful, didn't call for an attorney, assured us he understood his rights (when I think he didn't), signed his statement, offered us all the help he could, let us put a police seal on his place, gave us the clothes off his back."

"Why'd he do that?"

"So we could check for blood. Her blood. We didn't find any, by the way."

"Where is he now?"

"At a friend's house, waiting for us to tell him it's okay to go back home. We've been finished for some time now. I didn't want to call him until this gallery thing ran its course. Well, it's run its course. His call is next."

"Don't call him."

"Why?"

"I need time to think."

Brosnan bawled across the line, "You promised! You... you dining room detective."

"I'm not in my dining room," I said with dignity, and hung up.

I want to think, I get out of Paulsburg. There's still a lot of

country in this state; lots of farmland, lots of stands of trees, lots of far-reaching and breathtaking forests. All that green—punctuated from place to place by the black-eyed yellow of sunflowers, clumps of daylily orange, the pulpy creams of dogwood blooms, brown fields of spring wheat—all those hopeful colors wash over you, push away the rutty city, its lumpy grays and blacks.

I was moving west toward a place called Bluestone. Twenty-nine miles stretch between Paulsburg and Bluestone. I would drive that distance, and if I hadn't come up with something by then, I'd call Brosnan and tell him to let LeBoyd into his house. Not that Brosnan might not have already done so. But I was hoping he hadn't.

I moved the car along the road. I didn't think of anything much. Flashes, half pictures came into my mind: Maureen, Brosnan, Lisbeth LeBoyd, Nicol LeBoyd, the Colsum painting. I tried to imagine what Maryanne LeBoyd (if that was her last name), whom I'd never seen, looked like. She came through as a shadow, as the gray edge of a shadow. The portrait was the key and a half image of it blurred again to just below the surface of my consciousness. Then the imagined

features of John Colsum. Another shadow. Find the picture, find the killer. I heard a beep, looked down at my digital watch. It was on the hour. I went from watch to odometer, was alarmed to see that twelve of my twenty-nine miles were gone.

If Lisbeth *didn't* sell the portrait, where was it? If it was stolen, LeBoyd was home free. If it wasn't, LeBoyd was the only possible suspect. But where was the picture? And why was it where it was?

Just forming those statements and questions took five miles. Another five miles, twenty-two of the twenty-nine, and I began to come up with a possible answer to the last question: insurance. Lisbeth's statement, "That would solve our problems," fit in with selling the painting. But it also fit in with faking its theft and claiming the insurance.

The next seven miles were taken up with putting together a scenario that went something like this: LeBoyd is in the house but doesn't show himself when Larrido's makes its delivery. He unframes the picture, puts it in his car. (I tried to remember the size of the picture and whether the LeBoyd's had a station wagon.) The idea is to stash the painting at Maryanne's. Before he goes, he dou-

blecrosses Lisbeth, kills her (though why he picked *that* loathsome way of doing it, I couldn't fathom). He drives to Fitzburg. Meanwhile, Maryanne starts calling the LeBoyd house, hangs up when she hears the recording machine at the Paulsburg end. She calls again. And again. And so on. LeBoyd arrives in Fitzburg, turns over the portrait, keeps up the calls, then phones the Paulsburg police. He waits for the callback, fakes shock, probably even goes to that emergency room. Maybe he is in shock. Maybe he needs that rest. He drives back to Paulsburg, sees the police, is cosily cooperative. Waits for the police to try to recover the portrait, catch the killer. Then he puts in for, gets the money from the insurance company. Now, there's a reserve of dough should *Spartacus* hit the shoals again. He's rid of a wife who was probably lashing him to death with her tongue. He and Maryanne still have the painting. And each other?

A sign was just ahead. It said, "Welcome to Bluestone."

On the outskirts of Bluestone, still in the country, I spotted a pay phone at a gasoline station. I pulled into the full-service lane. While the attendant filled up the car and checked under the hood, I di-

aled Brosnan's headquarters number. I got him right away.

"Where are you?" he said instead of hello.

"That doesn't matter. It's murder hidden in a conspiracy. For insurance money."

"You think we haven't thought of that?"

"I'm sure you have. Then why haven't you followed up? Don't answer. Let me. You didn't follow this lead—"

"Because we were following your gallery lead," Brosnan filled in, I thought a little snidely.

"That and because you thought LeBoyd's alibi was too tough to crack. But if you can crack it, you can find the Colsum portrait."

"Where?"

"At Maryanne's. Can you get the Fitzburg police to cooperate? The faster they get going the better. Maryanne could move it at any time. And tell them you cracked the time scheme, know how LeBoyd was in two places at the same time." I told Brosnan how I thought it was done.

"I think I can get the department up there to get a warrant and peek into her place. You better be right, Monahan. Anything else?"

"I have a couple of things maybe you could gather together."

"Try Santa Claus."

I ignored this and plunged on. "You have them or can get them with no trouble. You should be able to get them by, say, around seven." I remembered something my sister Maureen harped on constantly and added, "Please."

Brosnan let a little space develop before he answered. "Okay, Monahan, shoot."

I told him what I wanted. About the time I finished, I heard the sharp thump of a car hood snapping into place. "I'm leaving now. See you at seven. Oh, where'll we meet?"

"At LeBoyd's house. I want to take the seal off, return his clothes."

We hung up.

At seven sharp I walked through the front door of the LeBoyd residence. Brosnan held the door for me. Beyond him, I saw Sergeant Dempsey, the usual assistant Brosnan took along when he needed an assistant. Or an errand boy. Dempsey was standing in the hall casually looking through an entranceway, a broad, arched opening in the wall, into what I knew to be the living room.

"You know Dempsey," Brosnan said as he shut the door behind me.

I said I did and nodded to Dempsey. He nodded back.

"I got the three things you wanted," Brosnan said. "The Fitzburg people got me the telephone transcript from up there."

"Did they get the painting?"

"No. It wasn't in Maryanne's place. And she's not talking. Just now."

"Damn!" I said. "She must have moved it."

"The Fitzburg boys are working on that assumption. I hope it's more than an assumption, Monahan, because we've thrown around a lot of accusations today, likely violated someone's constitutional rights along the way."

"Has LeBoyd gotten in touch?"

"No, and I haven't called him. I'm glad he didn't call. I don't know what I would have said if he'd asked to get back in here."

I pointed toward the living room entrance. "Maybe we'd better hear the cassette first."

Brosnan, Dempsey, and I went into the living room.

As I've already mentioned, it was a large room. There was enough furniture in it to seat a sizable gathering without crowding the place. Any floor space not taken by furniture was filled by large statuary or spindly pedestals holding



smaller work. The walls were filled with pictures, mostly oils, investments by the LeBoyd's in young artists or gifts from them. Before a large fireplace, a sofa was arranged so its sitters could view the picture above the mantel.

Except the picture wasn't there. There was a large rectangular space, light against the darker color the wall had become, showing where the Colsum painting had hung. Now the painting's frame leaned against the right side of the fireplace. A few feet from the frame, a body outline was taped onto the wood floor, amid splotches of dried blood.

I looked, somewhat pointedly, at the paintings on the wall, the statuary scattered about the room.

"Yes," Brosnan said, "we noticed that. Not very bright, if you're cooking up a red herring, to take just one painting out of a sea of them."

"These others might not be worth much," I explained. "Still—"

Brosnan took a plastic case from his pocket. Inside the case I could see the black outline of an audio cassette. "The answering machine's on that table in the corner."

He played the cassette. The only voice we heard was Nicol LeBoyd's. There were three

messages. The first two were more or less the same. LeBoyd identifying himself, telling Lisbeth he'd been trying to get her, wondering where she was, saying that he'd probably be leaving Fitzburg soon but wanted to talk to her first. There was a note of concern in his voice—but, I thought, it could have been put there.

The third message went something like this: "This is Nicol again. It's now ten o'clock. I'm still in Fitzburg. I've been calling you, off and on, all afternoon, and all I get is the machine. I'm beginning to get worried, very worried. Call me here so I'll know you're all right. Then I'll leave here and come home. I'm worried. If I don't hear from you within the next ten or fifteen minutes, I'm going to call the Paulsburg police."

"And did he make all those calls?" I asked.

Brosnan handed me a sheet of paper. It was a copy of a machine printout. "You see," he said, "there are the three calls from Fitzburg you just heard and six before that."

"Those six aren't on the machine. Those ones were made by Maryanne."

"You can't prove she made them, and you can't prove he didn't make them."

"Look at the times." I handed the transcript back to Brosnan.

"What about them?"

"The six not on the machine are all, except for one, on the half hour. Exactly. His three are exactly on the quarter hour."

"As if," Brosnan said, "someone was making the calls just to get them on the phone company computer. Being too regular about it. Still doesn't prove anything."

"The Paulsburg printout?"

Brosnan handed me another sheet of paper. "It's not there," he said.

"It was too much to hope, I suppose, that he made that call to Maryanne from here telling her to start calling. And to hang up when the recorder came on. He probably used a public phone."

"In time, we could find out which one," Brosnan said. "Not that it would prove anything either. Provided he made the call at all."

"I guess you'll have to let him back into his house," I said. "I'll find my way out." I walked from the living room into the entrance hall. Once there, though, I stopped. Against the wall was a chair next to a phone table. I hadn't seen it coming in. On the chair's seat, clothing items were neatly folded, a pair of heavy driving

gloves on top of them. On the floor under the chair, a pair of shoes were neatly arranged. Draped around the back of the chair was a light brown blazer. The coat had a freshness about it, as if it were new—or renewed.

I called into the living room, "His clothes?"

Brosnan and Dempsey came out. "Yeah, we're returning them. You going?"

"In a moment. I just want to see the upstairs first."

"Wait for Garden Week," Brosnan said and made herding motions toward the front door.

Instead of going in the direction he wanted, I turned quickly and was halfway up the steps before he could grab me. I knew where I was going. During the interview, Lisbeth had given me a tour.

Brosnan caught up with me in the LeBoyds' bedroom. I was looking into a wastepaper basket.

Brosnan came over to where I stood. "What? What?"

I pointed at a wad of thin plastic jammed down into the basket.

"I see," Brosnan said and reached down.

"Easy, prints."

He pulled up the wad with two fingertips, gently shook it out. There was a pink Larrido's

Cleaners ticket attached to the plastic bag. Scratched on the ticket were the words "Coat, brown." A preprinted "DC," for dry clean, was circled. Pickup and delivery dates were entered; the latter, the previous day's date. At the bottom of the ticket were seven tearaway tags with room for eight. The ticket and its tags shared a common number: 3603.

"Yeah, that means there was a tag pulled off. The one that gets stapled to the garment getting cleaned." Brosnan placed the plastic bag carefully on the bed and looked around the room. "We could first look in the closets in here. Not be disappointed right away."

"No," I said, "let's go for broke. Larrido's always staples the ident tag to the inside pocket. Save klutzes' being humiliated in public when they forget to pull off the damn things."

I opened my coat, showed Brosnan where a Larrido's tag still clung stubbornly to the pocket there.

Brosnan walked slowly out of the bedroom and into the upstairs hall. I could hear him calling softly to Dempsey.

"Dempsey, lad, see that coat on the chair? Just take a peek inside it, at its pocket. If there's a dry cleaning tag there, tell me its color and number. Don't

tear the tag away from the coat."

Everything was so still I could hear Brosnan's heavy breathing. I was holding *my* breath. Then I heard Dempsey.

"Pink, three-six-oh-three."

Brosnan gave a whoop and I joined in as we both rushed down the stairs. On the ground floor, the whooping continued. We didn't say a coherent word, just continued whooping. Dempsey looked at Brosnan the way a promotable underling looks at a boss who has obligingly flipped out. The phone might have been ringing for some seconds before Dempsey picked it up. He talked awhile, then looked over at me.

"It's your sister," he said. "She wants to know when you're coming home."

"Maybe not for a long time," I answered.

"Amen to that," Brosnan chimed in, probably thinking of the several beers he'd consume after booking LeBoyd.

"Well," Dempsey continued, "she says Mr. LeBoyd is there, waiting on you and the lieutenant."

I don't know what we expected: Maureen held hostage at gunpoint? Maureen dead and stuffed in some closet? Maureen ravished by a mad dog killer? Both Brosnan and

I pushed our cars across town, breaking a few records and several laws in the process.

Whatever we expected to see, we didn't expect to see what we saw. Maureen and LeBoyd were in the dining room seated at the table. He had coffee and a dish of blueberry cobbler in front of him. They were talking easily, Maureen's face animated, his holding a beguiling half smile. She was clearly charmed. I remember thinking, here's a man who has a way with women, all women. They didn't hear us come in. We stood for some time watching them. I can't remember what they were talking about, but whatever it was, it had Maureen's complete interest and attention. I tried a low cough. Maureen turned and looked at us.

"Oh, Oscar, it's you."

"Are you all right?"

"Of course."

Brosnan walked around me into the dining room. "What brings you here, Mr. LeBoyd?"

"I called you, but the desk sergeant said you'd left to meet Oscar." He looked engagingly in my direction, smiled lazily. "So I came over here, thinking this was where you were. I'd like to get back into my house if it's all right with you. Not before I finish this delicious cob-

bler of Mrs. Greenspan's, though."

"I'm afraid you won't be doing that, Mr. LeBoyd."

LeBoyd stared wide-eyed at the plate in front of him. "Is there something wrong with this cobbler?"

"You know what I mean. The seal is still on your place."

"May I ask why?"

Brosnan suddenly sat down at the table. He looked tired, very tired. He barely nodded at Maureen, who was making serving signs at him. She set out a cup for Brosnan and one for Dempsey. She filled them with strong black coffee. Then she went to the kitchen to get my tea. Dempsey and I sat down, I next to LeBoyd.

"I'm going to cut right to the bone, LeBoyd," Brosnan said, not menacingly but rather like someone who's resigned to doing one more tiresome thing in his life. "We can place you in the house sometime after seven and before ten fifteen when you called us. A time you told us you were in Fitzburg. That blazer you accommodatingly let us check. We found no blood on it. Naturally, we wouldn't. That was part of the change of clothes you made in the house, getting out of your bloodied killing clothes. The mistake you made was selecting that blazer, which wasn't in the

house until after seven last night."

"It's my favorite," LeBoyd said. "I've always had a weakness for it."

"Now *the* question," Brosnan cut in, "and I'll remind you I read you your rights last night." LeBoyd nodded. "Would you care to make a statement? You don't have to."

"Why not," LeBoyd said. He threw up his hands, his fingers making small, delicate, intricate figurations, as if they'd found a harp. "I called Maryanne today. She told me you had people up there checking out her digs."

Dempsey moved then, pulled something from his pocket. "Let Sergeant Dempsey here set up his recorder," Brosnan said. "Then you can talk."

"I'll use the time to finish this delicious cobbler," LeBoyd said, smiling at Maureen as she came in with my tea and some cobbler for Brosnan and Dempsey. She set everything out and then went back to the kitchen. I knew where she was, in the chair closest to the kitchen's open door.

After the preliminaries, LeBoyd began speaking into the recorder. What he said in essence was this: He had been up in Fitzburg on legitimate business with Maryanne. When they were divorced, she had

asked for nothing other than sharing the Colsum painting. Now she had needs. So he was working out a maintenance agreement with her. A little money each month. Then he left and drove home. He rang the bell but got no answer. He searched around in his pockets for his keys and let himself into the house. He thought this strange, realized later Lisbeth was afraid to answer the door after what she had done. She had the picture down and out of the frame. When he saw it, he moved on her uncontrollably. The first blow knocked her out; the others were delivered to her supine form. He didn't know what he had done until it was too late. Then he forced himself to calm down and think what he could do. He changed his clothes, being careful not to let the stains touch anything. He put the stained clothing in a large plastic trash bag. He broke the kitchen door glass to help along the idea of an intruder. He didn't think anyone had seen him come in and hoped no one would see him go out. (Brosnan told me later that no one did.) He put the filled trash bag and the painting in his car. He let the car roll into the street and, some distance from the house, started the engine, put on the lights. Then he drove out of Paulsburg and

sped nonstop to Fitzburg, took over the calling from Maryanne while she burned the stained clothes in an incinerator out back. He ended by saying, "So there we are."

"Where's the painting?" Brosnan asked.

"In the car trunk. Outside. Blue Skylark." (Brosnan didn't do it, but I could imagine him slapping his forehead with the flat of his hand.) LeBoyd fished the keys from his pants pocket and slid them to Brosnan, who pushed them over to Dempsey. Dempsey picked up the keys, got up, left the room. I heard the front door open and close.

Brosnan looked at me. "Monahan?"

I spoke to the side of LeBoyd's face. "Did you do it for the insurance?"

He faced around so I could get a full view of his laugh. "Insurance? I never thought of insurance. Maybe I can collect, though."

This puzzled me, but I went on. "Was she going to sell the painting?"

"Not that I know of."

"There are no marks on your hands."

"I hadn't taken my gloves off from the car. Of course they wound up in the trash bag."

"There was a pair you wore when you returned to Fitzburg yesterday."

He pondered that. "Well, yes," he said at last. "I like to wear gloves when I drive. So I got another pair when I changed."

"Were they like the ones you wore when you came home the first time?"

"Maybe lighter," LeBoyd said, "but pretty much."

"What's all this about gloves, Monahan?" Brosnan said. "What I want to know is why did he do it? She wasn't going to sell it. It wasn't an insurance scam he was cutting her out of, according to him. Why did you do it, LeBoyd?"

Behind us, sounding as if it were light years away, locked in a guarded universe, I heard the dry resonance of the street door opening and closing. A second, two, five, seven seconds later, Dempsey was in the room. He hoisted the painting and laid it, face up, on the dining room table. It was still in its stretcher frame, the one over which the canvas is tacked. It was smaller than I had remembered it. Maureen tiptoed into the room and stood in a semidark corner.

LeBoyd stood up, put the palms of his hands on the table, and let his arms take his body weight. He stared, just stared, at his and Maryanne's portrait. He shook his head abruptly at the painting. "That's why.

Wouldn't you have done the same? Well, wouldn't you? She couldn't replace her, so she did that."

No one answered LeBoyd. We just, with him, stared at the painting, *its subjects separated by the jagged slash of a knife down its middle.*

"I swear, I felt it in Fitzburg, heard it scream out to me. John's voice."

For awhile we continued gazing at the sundered images of the mutilated painting. It had always seemed so big to me, but it was really small. Small enough to fit in the trunk of a car.

Brosnan brought us back to earth.

"Dempsey, take that thing and put it in our car. LeBoyd, I'm booking you on suspicion of first-degree murder. Maybe capital murder."

LeBoyd jumped away from the table. "You're crazy. I acted on impulse."

"I'll explain it all downtown. Meanwhile, put your hands behind your back."

Brosnan cuffed LeBoyd and turned him over to Dempsey, who'd come back in. As Dempsey led his prisoner out, Brosnan turned to Maureen and thanked her for her hospitality and commented in detail on the merits of her blueberry cobbler. It seemed unreal. To me, he

said in a whisper that might have been heard in China, "I see what you were getting at."

Maureen asked, "Anything before you go?"

Brosnan beamed. "Well now, would you have a beer somewhere about the premises? Don't bother with a glass."

Maureen fetched the beer, gave it to Brosnan. In the ten or fifteen steps between the dining room and the front door, he had the beer finished. He handed me the empty bottle, licked his lips, opened the door, and went out.

Maureen and I sat at the dining room table and drank a last cup of tea. Earlier I had called in the story to my paper.

"Remember," I asked Maureen, "LeBoyd's saying he might collect on the insurance?"

"He can't, though, can he? You can't profit from murder, can you?"

"Think about it," I pointed out. "The painting was mutilated *before* Lisbeth's death. It should be interesting to see what the insurance company says. LeBoyd could use the money beating a murder rap."

"That I don't understand," Maureen said. "First Degree. Or worse."

"Two things. One, there were six calls from Fitzburg that



didn't get on the answering machine but did get on the phone company computer because connections were made. We assumed LeBoyd had called from Paulsburg, telling Maryanne to make those phony calls after he killed Lisbeth. But he said he went nonstop to Fitzburg. So they must have cooked up those calls before he left Fitzburg the first time to come to Paulsburg. That says LeBoyd and Maryanne plotted Lisbeth's death before he ever started out."

"How cruel," Maureen whispered, then raised her voice. "You said there were two things."

"The gloves."

"He said he had them on from the car."

I got up and walked to the dining room window. It was open. The cool-warm air of early spring came through it. "Those were heavy gloves, Maureen. Winter gloves."

"You mean he had those gloves with him because he intended to kill her. Still—"

"Not enough? There's more."

"What more?"

I came back to the table, sat down, looked across at my sister. "No way in the world could he have groped around in his pockets looking for the house keys if he had been wearing gloves. Not those thick ones. He had to take them off to find the keys and then unlock the door."

"Which means?"

"He put them back on to kill her."

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# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Josef Koudelka/Magnum Photos*

Gravitas. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "March Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

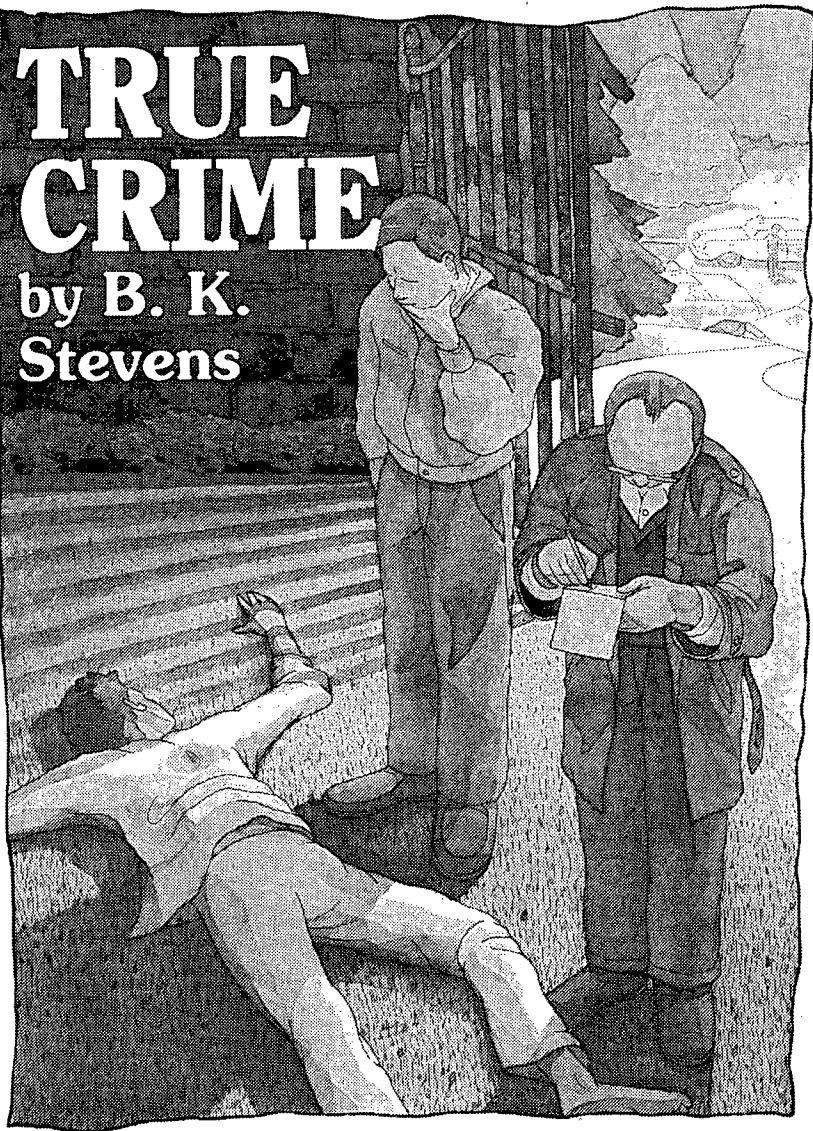
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The winning entry for the November Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

FICTION

# TRUE CRIME

by B. K.  
Stevens



*Illustration by Jim Adams*

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**D**ear Mother,  
I hope this reaches you okay. I was planning to write to you care of *National Geographic*, but Bolt says he's had good luck addressing his letters to "Outer Mongolia—General Delivery." I've gotten used to thinking he's right about pretty much everything, so I'm taking his advice. I hope he didn't steer me wrong this time.

I hope he didn't steer me wrong yesterday, either. See, we handled this homicide, and in most ways it was the same old story: Bolt solved the case while I was still memorizing the suspects' names, he assumed I'd been the one to figure everything out, and I got all the credit. You know that always makes me feel guilty, but after all these years, I'm used to it. The thing is, this time I'm also feeling uneasy about the way the case ended up. I think I maybe did something unethical, or even illegal, although I swear at the time I thought everything was regulation. Bolt knew exactly what was happening, of course—he always does. Since he didn't try to stop me, I guess it couldn't have been too bad. I'll feel better, though, if you tell me I did the right thing.

It started the way it usually does, with a call from the captain. Ellen and I had just settled down to watch Letterman—she was still explaining the monologue to me—when the phone rang. The captain said there'd been a shooting at the Longevity Institute and that Bolt was already on his way over to pick me up. He arrived halfway through Stupid Pet Tricks—I never did get to see what the labrador could do with the blender.

Bolt's looking fine, by the way, and he's still talking about how much he loved hiking through the Alps with you last month. He claims he put on a few pounds in Italy, what with the lasagna and all, but I can't see them. Anyhow, on the drive over, we talked about the Alymer Longevity Institute, pooling the scraps of gossip we'd heard over the years: how when Victor Alymer was six, his mother died of an accidental drug and alcohol overdose; how ten years later his father dropped dead of a heart attack at age forty-two; how Victor Alymer decided to turn the mansion he'd inherited into an institute and use his millions to find ways to make life healthier and longer; how he'd written three bestsellers; and how celebrities had flocked to his Institute and said that he'd changed their lives, that he was like a saint, almost like a god.

With all these stories fresh in my mind, it was a shock to see what was waiting for us not twenty feet behind the tall wrought-

iron gates of the Institute—Victor Alymer sprawled on the lawn, dead, a small but lethal red stain on his pajama top.

Half a dozen squad cars were already there, along with the lab team and, naturally, the coroner. Nothing on earth thrills her as much as beating detectives to the scene. She was crouched by Alymer's side and looked up perkily as we approached.

"Three bullets," she announced—she loves answering questions before we ask them. "All right through the heart. Small caliber, close range. Dead at least two hours. No watch, no rings, no wallet. And the lock on the gate's been broken."

"Thanks, Sherlock," I said icily. I would have preferred to find out about the watch and rings and wallet myself, and she was definitely out of bounds noticing the broken lock. "So that puts the time of death around ten o'clock tonight."

She grinned. "Nice subtraction, lieutenant."

Damn. I should know better than to make an obvious comment around her. I looked away and noticed a man in a tan uniform standing off by himself with his head bowed. There was something familiar about the face, but I couldn't place him.

"You the night watchman?" I asked, and he nodded silently.

Bolt leaned forward and whispered. "It's Eliezer Kent, sir. Don't you remember? He retired from the force six years ago."

Sure, I remembered Eli Kent. But Kent must be close to seventy by now, and this guy didn't look fifty. And Kent—well, he was a top-notch patrolman, none better, but he'd always carried a pot-belly that made Santa Claus look anorexic, and a face puffed out by one too many rounds of Jack Daniel's. This guy was slim and sturdy and so obviously wholesome that you'd swear he'd never tasted anything stronger than two percent milk.

I squinted. "Kent?" I said tentatively.

He squared his shoulders. "That's right, Lieutenant Johnson. I'm glad you're on this case—and you too, Sergeant Bolt. You gotta find the bastards who did this."

"We'll do our best," I said. "Now, what can you tell us?"

He shrugged helplessly. "Not much. When I did my first round at nine, everything was quiet. So I went back to the house to help the custodian move some equipment in the gym. We didn't hear nothing, didn't see nothing. At eleven, I let him out by the back gate and started my second round." He sighed. "Then I found Victor. I tried CPR, even though I could see it was too late. I couldn't save him: So I called 911."

That fit with what the coroner said about time of death. But poor Kent—he had to be blaming himself for having a murder happen on his watch. I smiled at him, real friendly. “Well, there are some things we just can’t prevent, no matter how hard we try. And we’re lucky someone as experienced as you found the body, knew how to handle everything just right. Right, Bolt?”

“Absolutely, sir,” Bolt said, and made a note of it.

Maybe he was thinking of recommending Kent for a good citizenship award. Nice touch, Bolt, I thought. “Now, Kent,” I said, “did you notice anything else? People hanging around the grounds, a car driving off? What about the gate?”

“No people or cars. As for the gate, it was standing open a little, but I was too upset to notice much else. I didn’t even see the broken lock until the coroner pointed it out.”

I could feel her eyes boring into my neck, sneering. “One of the uniforms noticed something,” she said, and raised her voice. “Snyder! Come show Lieutenant Johnson what you found.”

Snyder brought over a small, anonymous-looking brown paper bag. “I found it lying half under a bush, lieutenant,” he said. “Just off the front path, about ten feet from the gate.”

I opened the bag carefully. No sales receipt inside, just a Snickers, two Hershey bars, a small bag of potato chips, Twinkies. I showed it to Kent, and his eyes about popped out.

“Do you think Mr. Alymer might’ve been carrying this bag?” I asked. “Do you think he might have dropped it when—”

“Not a chance.” Kent shook his head vigorously. “Victor never ate junk like that—nobody at the Institute does. The killer must’ve dropped it. Some punk kid must’ve broken in, shot him, robbed him, and dropped that sack of crud on our lawn.”

He made it sound like the last offense was as bad as the first three. But he probably had the sequence right. “Is there anybody else who might have seen or heard anything?” I asked. “Anyone else on the staff stay late?”

“Well, yeah.” He scratched his head. “Four of them live in the house. But they’re in bed by nine o’clock. That’s part of The Way.”

I didn’t follow all that, but I got the gist. “Take us to the house anyway,” I said. “Maybe the shots woke somebody up.”

“Okay,” he said, looking doubtful. “But the house is pretty far back, and they’re all sound sleepers. You always sleep sound when you follow The Way.” He cast a last mournful look at Victor Alymer’s body, which was now being lifted into the coroner’s van.



"That man changed my life," he said, his voice trembling. "Hell, he *saved* my life, gave me a life. And now—just forty-four—after all his work—just two years longer than his father." He shook his head, overcome. "It's not right."

Bolt and I followed him up the long gravel path that led to the mansion. "Sounds like you admired him a lot, Kent," I said. "You really go in for this longevity stuff, huh?"

"It's not just 'stuff,'" he said, then stopped cold and spun around to face me. "Look at me. Remember what I looked like six years ago? Well, after I retired, it got worse. My wife and I had split up years ago, we never had any kids, and once the job was gone, there was nothing. So I ate my way up to three hundred pounds, smoked three packs a day, drank myself to sleep every night, never got off my butt except to go buy more booze. I was half an inch from a heart attack, and I knew it, and I didn't give a damn. Then one night four years ago I went to one of Victor's lectures, just because I had no place else to go and couldn't face my four walls again. That did it. I signed the Pledge that night. You can see what it's done for me."

"I sure can," I said, and meant it. "And it's all because of wheat germ and yogurt and pushups?"

"It's more than that." He started striding toward the house again. "It's The Alymer Longevity Way. It's up at five, in bed by nine—every day. Morning workout, noon aerobics, evening jog—every day. Three Meditation Pauses—every day. No liquor, no tobacco, no caffeine, no meat, no preservatives, no saturated fats, no refined sugars, no salt—never."

"That's great," I said, struck by the genius of it. "If you follow all those rules, you're bound to live a long time—and when you die, you won't really mind. Hell, you'll hardly even notice."

He gave me an odd look. "That's more or less the idea."

"But of course you yourself need to follow an adjusted schedule," Bolt said, speaking up for almost the first time. "Since you're the night watchman. And what about Mr. Alymer? Did he have a special schedule, too, since he's the director?"

"Absolutely not," Kent said, a little indignant. "Up at five, in bed by nine, just like everybody else."

"But not tonight," Bolt pointed out. "If the coroner's right, he was out walking on the grounds around ten."

"Well, something must've happened," Kent said, not missing a beat. "See, from his room, he's got a clear view of the front gate."



Those creeps must've made some noise when they broke in, and it must've woke Victor up, and he must've gone out to investigate. That makes sense, don't it?"

It made such obvious sense that I didn't bother to say I agreed, especially since I was a little winded by the walk. The house is a long way back from the gate. Kent didn't seem to mind the distance, though. Almost twice my age, and still breathing perfectly steady. So was Bolt. That'll please you, Mother, but it got me steamed. Nobody enjoys watching old guys show off.

We finally reached the house, which is your basic gracious mansion with columns and porticos and big, bulgy bay windows. "This the only building on the grounds?" I asked.

Kent nodded. "We're building a new gym at the rear of the property, but so far all we've got is the pit dug for the foundation. And with Victor dead—well, I hope they go ahead with the plans, but it's hard to say what'll happen to the Institute now." He sighed. "They do such good work here—they could help so many people—and now it could all just end."

I knew what he meant. When new guys take over a business, there's a damn good chance somebody'll screw up something. I slapped him on the back. "Don't worry. If the other employees are half as dedicated as you, it'll be fine. I mean, you'd do anything to make sure Mr. Alymer's work goes on, right? I'm sure the others would, too. Well, let's meet 'em."

Kent led us into a large parlor-type room, and I'll tell you I was stunned. Three people in a room, and not an ounce of cellulite among them. It didn't seem natural.

A petite young woman in a baby blue bathrobe made a run at us. "Oh, Eli!" she cried. "What's going on? This terribly pudgy policewoman with the *worst* skin and *such* limp hair woke us up and told us to wait here but wouldn't explain why. She said something about a homicide—is everything all right?"

Kent turned his head away, too choked up to speak. This is one of those moments they train us for. "I'm very sorry, ma'am," I said, "but Victor Alymer is dead. He's been shot."

The petite woman took a step back and said, "*Victor?*" The hard-muscled young man hunched on a sofa lurched forward in his seat and said, "*Shot?*" And the middle-aged black woman standing at the rear of the room stared at me and said, "Damn."

Luckily, I've gone to a workshop on the grieving process. "It's a tough break," I said. "Now, if you'll just put aside the denial and

anger and all, I've got some questions. The coroner puts the time of death at ten o'clock. Did you hear anything suspicious around then, like a gunshot? Or, better yet, three?"

The black woman gave me a long look. "I heard *something* loud," she said. "It woke me up. I can't say if it was a gunshot—I thought it was just a car backfiring. And it wasn't at ten. It was later. I know because I have a problem with insomnia, and I didn't get to sleep until after ten."

"If you'd put more spirit into your workouts," the petite woman said primly, "you'd *never* have insomnia." She gave me a bright smile. "I fell sound asleep at nine, right after Victor left our room. I didn't hear anything. Or see anything. Sorry."

The hard-muscled man had been staring at me pretty intensely, then gave a little jump when he realized I was staring back. "I didn't hear anything, either," he said, and looked down quickly.

Kent looked puzzled. "We should ask Bess, too," he said. "But where is she? Still up in your room, Georgie?"

The petite woman pursed her lips in disapproval. "No. I haven't seen her since, like, dinner. I mean, I don't think she even *jogged*. And when Victor came by our room at nine to say goodnight, she still hadn't shown up. He was totally ticked."

Well, well, I thought. So not everyone at the Institute follows The Way as strictly as Kent. This Bess, whoever she might be, was obviously enjoying a late night out. I snapped my notebook shut. These people couldn't tell me anything about the intruders who killed Alymer. "Thank you all very much," I said, and started for the door. But Bolt tugged at my jacket.

"His room," Bolt whispered. "Victor Alymer's room. Shouldn't we have a look?"

"If you want." Gawking at a dead man's bedroom, just out of morbid curiosity—that didn't seem like Bolt. "I don't think it'll tell us anything we don't already know, though."

"Oh, I'm sure you're right, sir," Bolt said readily. "But we might as well confirm it, don't you think?"

Confirm what, I thought grumpily—that Alymer was indeed dead and therefore not safely asleep in his room? But since Bolt may be my stepfather some day (I wish you'd give me just a hint about that, Mother), I indulged him. Kent led us up to the small third floor room. It was pretty Spartan—a cotlike bed with a military-style blanket tucked in at crisp hospital corners, a big metal desk with just a phone and a computer on it, a straight-backed

chair with a bathrobe draped over it, bookcases stuffed with thick medical texts and slim inspirational paperbacks.

"Satisfied?" I asked, turning to Bolt.

"Oh yes." He pointed at the ceiling. "The light's on."

Not exactly a major revelation. Naturally, Alymer turned it on when he heard the disturbance outside. I walked over to his one window and peered out. Yes, he had a clear view of the front gate from here, just like Kent said. Everything fit. Now, we just had to somehow track down the person who had bought that bag of junk food, and then we could make our arrest. I thanked Kent for his help and said we'd probably be back the next day.

"And please give us a call," Bolt said, "if that other staff member comes in."

Sort of a dumb request. She hadn't been at the Institute when the shooting happened, so what could she tell us? I was going to ask Bolt about it when we got into the car, but he jolted the question clear out of my mind by congratulating me on my restraint. Restraint? I hadn't realized I'd shown any restraint. "What do you mean?" I asked nervously.

"Oh, just that a lot of lieutenants would have questioned the staff further tonight," he said, waving cheerfully to the lab team as we drove through the iron gate, "since this is obviously an inside job. At first, I'll admit, I was surprised by your decision to leave so soon, but now I'm convinced you're right—as you always are, sir. After all, only one of those people is guilty. Why put the innocent ones through an all-night ordeal, after they've just had such a dreadful shock? The murderer will still be there in the morning."

I felt the cold sweat starting. The murderer would still be there in the morning? The murderer was there *now*? I fought the impulse to tell Bolt to turn the car around. Stay cool, Walt, I ordered myself. "The lock on the front gate was broken," I said, real casual. "Alymer didn't have a watch or rings or a wallet."

Bolt chuckled. "And the coroner considered those facts significant! I was at first just a bit taken aback by your sarcasm, sir, when you called her 'Sherlock,' but then I realized how justified your attitude was. Did she *expect* to find a wallet in a pajamas pocket? Does she think a killer can't break a lock to fake a break-in, and grab some jewelry to fake a robbery?"

He had a point there. All that *could* have been faked easily enough—but then again, it could all be real, too. And if Victor Alymer hadn't heard someone breaking in, why was he wandering

around the grounds long after his strictly-kept bedtime?

"Kent said the killers must've woke Alymer up when they broke in," I said, trying to sound nocommittal.

Bolt sighed, "Yes, that's what Kent *would* say. It was very tactful of you, sir, to simply remain silent after he presented that pathetic theory, rather than immediately pointing out its flaws. Would a man who employed a night watchman go out alone and unarmed, in his pajamas, to confront intruders? Alymer had a phone in his room—it was good to confirm that—and I'm sure there's one in the gym where Kent was working. Why didn't Alymer call him for assistance? Then there's the obvious fact that Alymer never went to bed at all tonight. As we saw, his bed hadn't been slept in—the blanket was still neatly tucked in. He was sitting up, with the light on, watching the front gate, waiting for—but I apologize, sir. Here I am jabbering on, carried away as usual by my enthusiasm for your deductions, boring you with details you sorted out long ago."

Bore me a little longer, I begged silently. Who was Alymer waiting for? And then it came to me. The missing staff member, Bess Somebody. Alymer was annoyed when she wasn't in her room at nine, so he waited up for her, planning to chew her out. When she drove up to the gate, he went out to confront her, he spotted her trying to sneak in the bag of junk food, he blew up, he fired her—and she whipped out a gun, shot him, faked a break-in, and drove off in a panic. Good God, yes. She was the killer! She had to be! And I hadn't bothered to find out her last name!

Worse, at this very moment, I was letting her get away. Guys get fired over mistakes a lot less dumb than this. It took me a full minute to work up the saliva I needed to speak. "Bolt, we've got to track down that missing staff member," I said. "That Bess. She could be anywhere by now."

"Really?" He looked surprised. "I would have guessed the number of possible places would be limited. Obviously, I need to give this matter more thought." He pulled up in front of my house and smiled blandly. "Sleep well, sir."

I didn't sleep at all. I just tossed and sweated, sweated and tossed. We've done it this time, I thought. Bolt's crazy confidence in me has finally done us in. He thinks I've got some brilliant reason for thinking we can wait until morning to track down this murderer, and as a result she's on her way to South America, and we're on our way to the unemployment line.

I cheered up some when Bolt picked me up the next morning and I saw how sunny he looked. He's a smart guy, I reminded myself. If he's this happy, things can't be as bad as they seem.

"Straight back to the Institute, sir?" he asked. "I made a few calls, and there's not much for us to do at the station. The coroner says she won't have definite answers until ten."

I nodded, not that I was interested in any definite answers the coroner might have to offer. Oh, sure, it would be nice to be sure about the caliber of the bullets, but it would be a lot nicer to find the gun, and the person who had fired it. Bolt was right about going back to the Institute, though. After all, the people there had known this Bess, worked with her—they might have some ideas about where she'd be likely to run.

Not surprisingly, a medium-sized horde of reporters had surrounded the Institute, shouting questions and shooting pictures. Poor old Kent stood behind the patched-up iron gate, struggling to keep them back. He smiled wanly when he saw us.

"Morning, lieutenant," he said, opening the gate for us and ignoring the outraged squawks of the reporters. "Morning, sergeant. I didn't expect you two to come back so soon."

"Oh, well," I said, trying to make it hearty. "Loose ends, you know, Kent. Loose ends. Say, did that other staff member finally show up last night? What was her name again? Bess?"

"Bess Richards," he said, nodding. "Our nurse. No, she didn't show up. I don't understand it. She hadn't signed out, and staff members *never* stay out overnight unless they get permission and sign out. What's even weirder is, this morning I noticed her car parked out front." He pointed to a red Mustang in the little stretch of street that served as the staff lot. "So I guess wherever she went, she walked—but I can't think of any place within walking distance that she'd go to and stay overnight. Or she could have called a cab, but why do that when she's got a car? Anyway, by now she must've heard Victor's dead. So why hasn't she come back, or at least called?"

Well, that gave me some hope. Maybe, after she'd killed Victor Alymer, she'd been so panicky that she'd taken off on foot. That meant she might still be in town. Even if she'd run straight to the airport, a plane ticket is easier to track down than a Mustang. I perked up. "Maybe the other staff members will have some ideas," I said. "Where are they this morning?"

"Well, Liza's probably in the main office," Kent said. "She's our business manager. And John and Georgie are probably in the gym or the weight lifting room, in the basement." He looked at us wistfully. "I'd love to go with you, but I gotta stay here. Will you keep me posted about what's going on? It's been a long time since I was around a real police investigation."

"We'll be back as soon as we can, Eli," Bolt said, his voice all gentle and soft. "We'll find someone to relieve you out here, and then the three of us can have a nice, long talk."

Sweet old Bolt, I thought, damn near misty-eyed. Trust Bolt to understand how a retired cop would feel in a situation like this. I only hope I run into cops as kind as he is if I ever wind up as a night watchman somewhere.

I wanted to talk to this Georgie first, since she was Bess Richards' roommate. So we went down the basement, which had been remodeled into a regular athletic complex, and wandered through shower rooms and handball courts until we came to a huge central area that was apparently the main gym. There was Georgie, wearing a turquoise leotard and hot-pink leg warmers, leading an aerobics class that consisted of two hard-puffing housewives and one skinny, sulky teenage girl. Bolt waved with enthusiasm; Georgie waved back, then signaled the class to stop.

"We'll end class early today," she announced. "In memory of Victor and all. Plus I wanna talk to some cops. But before you go, let's take a Meditation Pause. Here's a poem from Victor's bestselling *Motivational Minutes*. It's called 'Today,' and it's one of my favorites. I hope it's one of yours."

She took a paperback from her gym bag, struck a solemn pose, and began to read:

"This  
Is a new day.  
It is not a month,  
Or even a week.  
But it is a day.  
Your day.  
What will you do with it?  
Will you corrode it with salt?  
Will you weigh it down with fat?  
Will you sour it with sugar?  
Will you confuse it with alcohol?  
Or will you make it a wellness day,

A day of hope and exercise,  
Of compassion and sound nutrition,  
And at least eight glasses of water?  
Today  
Is a new day.  
*Your day.*  
It is yours to shape as you will.  
Don't blow it."

She closed the book, dropped into a yoga-type squat, and closed her eyes. We were silent for three solid minutes. I was pretty choked up. Victor Alymer had been some poet.

Then Georgie bounced up. "Okay, ladies," she said. "See you next week, and don't forget to stretch!"

As the students shuffled out, she grabbed a towel and walked over. She's late twenties, not quite five foot two, with long blonde hair that was twisted into a knot at the moment but had looked full and fluffy last night. A knockout, I thought; but when she got right up close, I changed my mind. She's not really pretty, just so thin that at first you assume she is. Her nose is too big for her face, her eyes are too small, and her mouth has this pinched, hard look to it. She'd certainly done the best she could with what she had, though, and I gave her credit.

"Well, hi," she said, giving us each a quick hug, sweaty but nice. "So here you are, hard at work, looking for the person who killed poor Victor. That is so cool. Can I help?"

If only all the people we question could be that friendly and cooperative. "I think there might be," I said. "Now, your name's Georgie, right? That short for Georgiana?"

"Georgiana Reed." She scrunched up her nose in a way that would have been cuter if the nose had been smaller. "But you *gotta* call me Georgie—everyone does. You got a suspect yet?"

"Oh, we're not focusing on anyone in particular," I said. In this game, you gotta be subtle. "Now, about Bess Richards. She never came back last night. Any ideas about where she is?"

Georgie's mouth twitched briefly. "Yeah, that's weird, isn't it, Bess disappearing right after Victor was shot? I hope she didn't—but no. I'm sure she wouldn't. 'Course, I don't know her all that well. She's only been here four months—we never had a nurse before, you know, and I don't know why Victor decided we needed one now. Anyhow, even though we're roommates, we never got close. I tried to be friendly—I try to be friendly to *everybody*, that's

the kind of person I am—but she's sorta cold, sorta snooty. Sorta bitchy. She acts like just because she's been to college she's better than the rest of us. Oh, she'll suck up to Victor and Liza, but nobody else is worth noticing. Plus she's got a real nasty temper."

Just the sort who'd go for her gun if someone criticized her eating habits. This case was starting to add up. "About last night," I prodded.

"Oops, right." She giggled, clasping a hand over her mouth. "Sorry. Well, my guess is she went out with this guy she's been seeing. He's a lawyer, or a professor, or something dull like that. I saw him once, and I couldn't *believe* she'd date him. He's so gross—glasses, and no biceps, I mean, he's like *balding*. Absolutely, totally bogus. I was, like, stunned."

I glanced uncomfortably at Bolt, hoping the bit about glasses hadn't hurt his feelings. And Georgie really should have noticed that Bolt's hairline obviously isn't what it used to be, or where it used to be. He didn't look offended. He was nodding to himself in that quiet way of his, taking notes, jotting and underlining like crazy. That's a hint for me, I thought. This boyfriend must be important. "Do you know his name?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Bess mentioned it a few times, but I didn't really focus, you know? I mean, like, who could care, right?"

"Well, maybe someone else will remember it. How did this Bess get along with Mr. Alymer?"

She puckered her lips, thinking it over. "Not great. Victor had to yell at her a few times, for not keeping to The Way. This wasn't the first time she's stayed out past hours, you know. And once she hid this *candy* bar in her drawer, and of course Victor got majorly ticked about that."

"And how," Bolt put in, "did Mr. Alymer discover these infractions?"

She opened those squinty eyes as wide as they'd go. "Well, I, like, told him. I mean, if I covered up for her, *I* could get in trouble, right? And I hated having that junk in our room. I mean, how could she *stand* to eat stuff like that? Who wants to get fat and die? Who wants to do either one, even?"

So Bess Richards and Victor Alymer had a history of conflicts, over the very issues that had probably set them off last night. "Does she own a gun?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," Georgie said slowly. "I mean, I never actually like *saw* her with one, but she could keep it hidden, you know?"



Her eyes hardened. "Or she could have like stolen one. I mean, John has guns, because he belongs to a target-shooting club, and now that you mention it I remember once seeing Bess sneaking around outside his room, looking guilty and all."

"Then I'd better talk to this John. Is he the man who was here last night? The muscular one?"

She smiled. "The *very* muscular one. I mean, have you ever like *seen* a better set of pecs? Come on—I'll take you to him. I'm sure he's in the weight room."

John Mason looked like he never spent much time outside of the weight room. And in case you're interested, Mother, no, I never *have* seen a better set of pecs, or a better build generally speaking. What makes it even more unfair is that he's handsome, too. You could spend ten years trying and still not find anything wrong with his face. He was heaving free weights when we came into the room, and Georgie Reed scurried over to him, looking like she could scoop him up in her arms, barbells and all.

"Oh, John!" she said. "These are the cops, and they're asking *lots* of questions about Bess. So I told them how bitchy she is, and how we've never really had much to do with her, and how she was always fighting with poor Victor. And now they want to know if she maybe stole one of your guns."

Damn. This Georgie was obviously pretty bright—she'd seen right through my line of questioning. I didn't like her tipping my hand that much. "And we thank you very much for your help," I said, steering her toward the door. I got her out of the room and turned around to see John Mason scowling at me.

"What the hell was she talking about?" he demanded. "What's this about my guns? Nobody's stolen any of them. They're all in my room, right where they're supposed to be."

"You're sure?" I said. "You've checked them recently?"

He glared, sliding another weight onto his barbell. "I checked them last night, after you left. Wouldn't you check *your* guns, if there'd been a shooting outside *your* house? But if you want to check them yourself, be my guest. Run any tests you like. You'll see they haven't been fired in weeks."

"I wasn't assuming they had," I said hastily. Oh Lord, I thought. This guy thinks I suspect him. And he's an awful big guy. "Forget the guns. If you say they're fine, they're fine. Could you give me your impressions of Bess Richards? What sort of person is she?"

He fiddled with those weird cut-out gloves. "She's all right," he said. "Could stand to be an inch taller, and her earlobes are too skimpy. But dynamite figure, great hair, nice features, good teeth."

"That's not what I meant," I said, although I was developing a definite interest in meeting this woman. "Miss Reed said Bess Richards has a hot temper. Is that your impression, too?"

He shrugged—the first time I've ever seen a man shrug while hoisting what looked to be a couple hundred pounds. "No," he said. "Look, don't put any stock in what Georgie says. She's real unstable, and she's always running around starting trouble, spreading gossip, making stuff up. If you ask me, she was jealous of Bess, because Bess was a goodlooking girl and Georgie's such a dog." He grimaced—with disgust, not with exertion. "Did you see how mangy she looks today? I swear to God one of her eyebrows is higher than the other."

When you're as handsome as he is, I guess you have high standards. "I hear Bess Richards had some conflicts with Mr. Alymer," I said.

"Those were no big deal." He was swinging the barbell from shoulder to waist, waist to shoulder, so smoothly and quickly and gracefully that you'd think gravity had been temporarily revoked. I've never seen a man with better control. "And Georgie was always the one who started them, by running to Victor with some story. She probably told you about the dumb candy bar. Well, Victor didn't give a damn about that. Bess was a first-rate nurse. Victor knew she wasn't really committed to The Way, but as long as she did her work well, he was satisfied."

That put a whole new light on things. For the first time, I started to have doubts about the basic theory. "Do you know where Bess Richards might be now?" I asked.

The waist-to-shoulder swings became more rapid. "Maybe with that guy she's been seeing, that dentist or accountant or whatever. Or maybe she took off by herself. She once said she might do that some day. See, our routine here is pretty rigid, and she was getting restless. It wouldn't surprise me if in a few months we get a letter from her, saying she's moved to New York or Las Vegas and wants us to send her her clothes."

We'll find her a lot sooner than that, I promised myself. "Do you know her boyfriend's name?" I asked.

John Mason frowned. "No. And I wouldn't call him her boyfriend—he's just a guy she saw a few times. Look, why waste your

time worrying about that? Eli Kent told me some punks killed Victor—some crazies all pumped up on heroin or cocaine or sugar or something. Why aren't you checking out guys like that?"

"That may be our next step," I assured him. I looked through my notes for the questions I'd jotted down last night. "Oh, yeah. Do you know who inherits Mr. Alymer's estate?"

His arms snapped down straight, and now the weights hovered above his knees. The lifting hadn't made his face red, but the question did. "What the hell are you getting at?" he demanded.

"Nothing," I said, panicking at the fury in his eyes. "It's just that in a case like this, we naturally wonder who—"

"And it's just a coincidence you asked me, huh?" He set the weights down and folded his arms. "You think I'm stupid? I know what Georgie thinks, what she probably told you. But she's wrong. Victor may have left me a little something, but not the house, not the Institute. He's got a board of trustees. They'll make the decisions, and Liza will write the checks. I'll never get near the real money."

"I wasn't implying anything," I said, sweating more than he was. "It was just a question. When a rich man is shot—"

"—you figure he was shot for his money," Mason cut in angrily. "And since he wasn't married, you figure his best friend's getting the money, his best friend shot him. That's how you cops think—caffeine-guzzling, doughnut-gulping, ass-dragging slob! What do you understand about anything? I'd sooner cut off my right arm than shoot Victor."

"I'm sure that's true," I said, and saw Bolt nod in agreement. Good. That meant Mason was definitely innocent, since Bolt is never intimidated by a suspect and never wrong about a murderer. Time to calm Mason down, even if it meant being a tiny bit indiscreet. "Maybe some cops would think you're the obvious suspect, but Bolt and me, we know things aren't always what they seem. Frankly, at this point we've got just one suspect in this shooting, and that suspect definitely is not you. And we're sorry about the death of your friend."

"Thanks." He looked sulky now, not angry, and picked up his barbell again. "Sorry I got so steamed, but the idea that I could kill Victor—well, it's plain wrong. When I met him, I was unemployed, a high school dropout, hanging around a tenth-rate gym feeling sorry for myself. Victor saw my potential, asked me to be his personal trainer, made me fitness director here. He was the

only one who ever really appreciated me. God! I'm going to miss him so much."

The barbell was still going up and down, smooth and steady, but I could see his chin quivering. Poor guy, I thought. "Don't you worry," I said. "We'll find this killer, and that'll help. You'll feel better once everything is settled."

"I'm sure he will," Bolt whispered as we headed up the stairs. "Goodness! You handled that interrogation brilliantly. Only one suspect in this shooting! Things aren't always what they seem! Oh, my! Your wit, sir—your cutting wit! Sometimes, you make it difficult for me to maintain an unperturbed aspect. Do we talk to the business manager next, to Liza Ingram?"

"I guess," I said, wondering why he thought I'd been so witty, and how he'd managed to learn her last name.

She was sitting at a computer terminal in a spacious but sparsely furnished office at the rear of the building. She's tall and lean and has that severe, no-frills look about her, like she'd decided a long time ago that she probably could be attractive but it wasn't worth the bother. She didn't stop typing when she saw us, just glanced up briefly and scowled.

"I *knew* it," she said. "You want to paw through my files, don't you? Well, go ahead. I'll have to spend ten hours straightening out the mess you'll make, but why should *you* care? They're on top of the file cabinet—personnel files, budgets, Victor's will. What else do you want to see?"

"This'll do for now," I said, a little floored since I wouldn't have thought to ask for any of it. To keep up appearances, I flipped through some folders, but they were full of spread sheets and pie charts, and you know technical stuff depresses me. So I pushed them over to Bolt and picked up the will. That, I can understand. "So who gets what?" I asked.

She snorted, still typing, still not looking up. "Perfect. You don't just want to mess up my files—you want to talk to me, too. Well, that's *great*. It's not like I have anything important to do. Why should *you* take the trouble of reading the will? I'm *delighted* to tell you *all* about it." She finally stopped typing, took off her glasses, and glared at me. "I haven't actually read it—it's in a sealed envelope, as you'd notice if you bothered to notice *anything* for yourself. But Victor was the open type. We all know the major provisions. The house and most of the money go to the Institute foundation, to be managed by the trustees. Eli and Georgie and I

get twenty thousand each. And John—naturally, John gets more. He was *always* the favorite. He gets a hundred thousand, and Victor names him as the new director.”

“Nothing for Bess Richards, then,” I observed shrewdly.

“Well, what did you *expect*?” she said, like she’d never heard a stupider thing in her life. “Bess wasn’t working here when Victor made his last will. He was planning to add her when he did his annual update, provided she decided to stay at the Institute. Would that have been soon enough to satisfy you?”

“So he wasn’t sure she’d want to stay,” I said, pouncing on the only relevant scrap of information. “Isn’t she happy here?”

She rolled her eyes up, as if asking heaven for patience. “Look. She’s making three times what she could make at a hospital, for a hell of a lot less work. Plus free room and board, and benefits so generous they’re idiotic. So of course she’s happy. We’re all happy. It’s a happy place.”

I’ll tell you, Mother, it took a lot of guts for me to keep asking questions. “But I hear she keeps breaking the rules,” I said. “I hear she had a lot of conflicts with Mr. Alymer.”

She reached across the desk, grabbed a large jar filled with sunflower seeds, started shooting seeds into her mouth and crunching them viciously. “I get it. Bess hasn’t shown up, so you think she shot Victor. I *knew* you’d decide it was one of us. So why not just arrest her, then? Why keep bothering me?”

“Miss Ingram, I didn’t say I suspect anyone, and I won’t take up much of your time. I just want your impressions of Bess Richards—and of your other colleagues.” I added that last bit to throw her off, and I’ve gotta say I did it pretty smoothly.

“My impressions of my colleagues?” She sat back in her chair and considered, still crunching the seeds. “Okay. Here goes. Bess is probably the sanest and most sensible of the lot. No wonder. She hasn’t been here long. As for Georgie Reed, she won’t be satisfied if she merely lives forever. She also wants to stay a teenager forever, and so far she’s doing a good job, at least intellectually. John Mason—well, if you’re looking for someone who’s really happy here, John’s your man. His idea of heaven is a place where he can divide his time equally between building his biceps and admiring them in the mirror. Eli Kent is the devoted disciple type. He’s probably the only one of us who buys into all Victor’s ideas heart and soul.”

"And what about you?" I asked. Not that it really seemed relevant, but I was curious. "You seem sort of sarcastic about the Institute. Why do you put up with all those rules?"

"Oh, I don't mind the rules." She shrugged. "I've never been a smoker or a drinker anyway, the exercise is no big deal, and food doesn't interest me—the stuff you get here isn't that much duller than the stuff you get anywhere else. And once upon a time, I thought this place would be a gold mine. Megavitamins for the body, cliches for the soul, *mens sana in corpore sano* with the emphasis definitely on *corpore*—exactly what this country wants. I didn't mind doing a few pushups if it meant getting in on the ground floor of a deal like that."

Bolt cut in then, looking up from the stack of folders he'd been plowing through. "The Institute doesn't seem to have performed as you expected," he said. "As I look over these financial records, I get the impression that the Institute is not currently making a profit."

"Now, that's what I call tact." She grinned. "We've been losing money for years. We used to have a residential program—a dozen clients at a time, living in the house, paying fat fees. But the last one left months ago, and our exercise classes are tiny. If it weren't for Victor's personal fortune and what's left of his royalties, we'd be broke."

"And yet Mr. Alymer added a new staff member recently," Bolt pointed out, "and you're building a new gym."

"Yeah, well, *you* try getting Victor Alymer to pay attention to budget. I told him to market a Longevity Diet, loosen up the Pledge, do *something* to make our programs more palatable. But he never saw the Institute as a business. It was still mostly his home, the place where he was going to live his long, healthful life." She shook her head. "Or maybe it was his fortress, and we were the soldiers he hired to keep the wolf away."

"The wolf?" I said, confused again. "What wolf?"

She looked at me in surprise. "Why, death. Is there any other wolf?"

This was getting us nowhere. "Back to Bess Richards," I said. "Do you know the name of this man she's seeing?"

"Tom Burke," she said promptly. "He's an architect at Contemporary Designs. Makes about forty thousand a year. And, yes, before you ask, Bess did say she was going out with him last night. Now, can I *please* get back to work?"

"Right away." I stood up. "Come on, Bolt."

"Just one moment," he said, blinking apologetically. "Miss Ingram, I notice that all the personnel folders contain medical records except for Mr. Alymer's. Where would his be?"

She sighed impatiently. "How should I know? They're *supposed* to be there. Maybe Bess pulled them for some reason."

"We'll ask her." If we ever find her, I thought. Anyway, who cares about a gunshot victim's medical records? What was Bolt looking for—symptoms of vulnerability to bullets? "Thanks, Miss Ingram," I said. "We'll be going now. We've got some digging to do."

Bolt sprang out of his chair. "Digging!" he cried. "My God! Why didn't I think of it? Miss Ingram, with your permission, I'll take the liberty of using the phone in Mr. Alymer's office." And he raced off down the hall.

By the time I caught up with him, he was hanging up the phone. "The lab team will be here in a few minutes, sir," he said, "to begin the search. And a squad car's coming, too, so we'll have someone to relieve Kent at the gate."

That's right—Kent. I'd forgotten we'd promised to talk to him before we left. Frankly, I felt like skipping it, but a promise is a promise, Mother, like you always taught me, and I didn't want to make a nice old guy like Kent feel slighted. So I walked alongside Bolt, trying to figure out why he thought I'd wanted a lab team to conduct a search, and what he thought they'd find. That was a mystery, that one, and it had my mind all tied up in knots. "Look, Bolt," I said, "would you do most of the talking when we see Kent? I'm feeling distracted."

"You're focusing on the central question." He nodded in immediate understanding. "That is something of a tossup, isn't it, sir? Yes, I'll be happy to handle the conversation with Kent. It might be easier for him that way, since I've known him longer and am closer to his rank."

It didn't make much sense, but I'm used to that. The squad car and the lab team arrived at the front gate at the same time we did; a burly patrolman took over at the gate; Bolt whispered to the lab team and sent them off toward the rear of the property with shovels and things. Why I didn't know, but sometimes it's better not to ask. Then Bolt and Kent and I hiked back to the house, ending up in Kent's tiny but neat security office. Kent insisted I take the one chair, he perched on the desk, and Bolt stayed stand-



ing, peering at some framed photos on the wall.

"Why, here's one of your graduating class at the academy," he said, smiling at the sight of so many familiar faces. "And here's dear old Chief Doyle, may he rest in peace. And this one—that's Chelnick, isn't it? Your first partner?"

"Yeah, that's Joe," Kent said and sighed. "Poor old Joe. If any guy ever got a bum deal, Joe did."

"I remember," Bolt said dreamily, and I could tell we were in for a string of old-cop stories. I tried to tune them out and concentrate on figuring out what the lab team was searching for, but Bolt's voice kept droning through. "It was during my first year on the force. Chelnick was chasing two suspects after a liquor store robbery. One fired at him, he fired back, one suspect fell, the other got away. And then it turned out that the dead suspect didn't have a gun on him."

"His buddy grabbed it," Kent said, getting red in the face just thinking about it. "Joe was sure he got the one who fired. Anyhow, what's the difference? They shot at him, he shot back—self-defense, pure and simple. Was it Joe's fault the damn lab team couldn't find the bullet? Internal Affairs had no business firing him and taking his pension away."

"That's how almost everyone on the force felt," Bolt said, nodding. "My partner advised me to carry an extra gun strapped to my leg, in case I ever found myself in a similar situation and had to plant a gun on a dead suspect. I never took the advice—I considered the practice unethical. But as I recall, most of my fellow officers did not share my sentiments." He looked at Kent, real intense. "Did you take the advice, Eli?"

Kent flushed. "Hell, what does it matter, after all these years? I don't wanna talk about ancient history. Tell me how you guys are coming on *this* case."

"On this case?" Bolt turned away from the photos and faced him. "We discovered some interesting facts today, Eli. Miss Ingram said Mr. Alymer updated his will annually—an unusual practice for a man in his mid-forties, wouldn't you say? Also, his medical records aren't in his personnel file—very odd. But perhaps he had special reasons for keeping them confidential. And do you have any theories about why he added a nurse to the staff four months ago, even though the Institute was losing money and didn't seem in need of additional employees?"

Kent swallowed hard. "I don't know nothing about his files," he said. "Or about why he hired Bess."

"Not even now?" Bolt said gently. "Not even in retrospect? Oh, Eli, Eli. As the lieutenant said last night, we know you'd do anything to make sure Victor Alymer's work goes on. Even if that means doing something not quite legal."

Those last words shattered the last of my concentration. Kent was the one person with a rock-solid alibi, assuming his story about being with the custodian until eleven checked out. So what not quite legal thing could he have done?

Bolt put a hand on his shoulder. "The coroner says Mr. Alymer died around ten o'clock, but Miss Ingram didn't hear gunshots until later. And didn't you understand the hints the lieutenant gave you last night? Didn't you see how he was preparing you for this moment, letting you know you hadn't fooled him? When he said there are some things you just can't prevent, didn't you get the point? When he said we were lucky an experienced person such as you found the body, didn't you catch the irony? Good heavens! You'd just told us that you'd given Mr. Alymer CPR, even though—and I quote—'I could see it was too late.' Too late! If a man is shot three times through the heart, does CPR do any good even if administered immediately? Wouldn't an experienced patrolman know CPR would be either useless or positively harmful in such a case?" He shook his head. "You weren't telling us about your discovery of a shooting victim, Eli. You were telling us about your desperate, futile attempt to revive someone who'd had a heart attack."

A heart attack? What the hell was he talking about? Unless I'd overlooked a corpse, nobody around here had died of a heart attack. I was about to protest when I was stopped cold by the sight of Eli Kent holding his face in his hands, crying.

"They would have laughed at him," he sobbed. "The whole Longevity Institute would be a big joke. Like the jokes they made when Jim Fixx had a heart attack—'Jim Fixx is dead, and Keith Richards is still alive.' I couldn't stand to see that happen to Victor, to see all his work just wiped out. And I didn't want to hurt anyone. I figured, a break-in, a robbery—you'd never catch anyone, no one would go to jail for it, it would just be another unsolved homicide, Victor would be a martyr, the Institute could go on. And meanwhile I could help you guys work on a real case again, like the old times. I thought I could maybe dust for a few fingerprints, maybe question a few suspects. Maybe—maybe even eat a few doughnuts." He blew

his nose wistfully. "And yes, damn it, I had a gun right there, strapped to my leg, the untraceable gun I've carried ever since Joe got fired. So where's the harm?"

I couldn't have told him. This whole thing didn't make much sense to me. Kent was still crying, and Bolt was murmuring about congenital defects and inherited conditions and terrible shocks and general ideas being valid despite personal limitations. I was on the verge of demanding an explanation when a man from the lab team burst into the office, his overalls muddy.

"You were right, lieutenant!" he said. "We found everything you expected us to find, just like Sergeant Bolt described it. We dug around in that foundation pit for the new gym, and first we found the gun and the ring and the watch, all right together. And then, not ten feet away, we found the body."

The body? Victor Alymer's body wasn't in any pit, it was safe in the morgue. What was he talking about? "And the sergeant's description of the body fits, too," the lab guy went on. "Sorta short, small earlobes, dynamite body, great hair, nice features, good teeth. We'll get somebody from the Institute to confirm it, but you can bet your life it's Bess Richards. Looks like a broken neck."

If anyone asks you if we Johnsons have strong constitutions, Mother, you can answer with a definite yes. I hardly flinched, not even when Bolt came over and shook my hand solemnly.

"It's a tragedy, of course," he said, "but I congratulate you on the accuracy of your deductions, and on the clever way you handled the questioning. Pretending to suspect Miss Richards, just to throw the others off guard and gauge their attitudes toward her—that was brilliant, sir. Well, this gentleman can notify the captain about the second body. And the entire staff should be gathered at lunch by now—shall we confront them with this new discovery, and with your final conclusions?"

"You confront them." I've got this real strong survival instinct, even when my head is spinning hard enough to lift it off my neck. "Why should I always get all the glory? And I—well, I'm overcome by grief. For Miss Richards."

"Of course, sir." He squeezed my hand. "But the tossup, your final conclusion—you haven't shared that with me." He frowned. "I *should* know. Something we heard this morning settled it, some slight, obvious thing of which I was half aware at the time. I *felt* it, yet it eludes my conscious grasp."

I waved my hand. "It'll come to you," I said weakly.

Bolt beamed. "Thank you, lieutenant. Your confidence in me, however undeserved, is nonetheless deeply appreciated."

So the lab guy left to call the captain, and Bolt and I walked up to the dining room on the first floor, with Kent trailing behind, still sniffing. Georgie Reed and John Mason and Liza Ingram were seated around a long, oval table, picking at oversized salads and little lumps of grain-and-grape goo. Kent sat down next to Liza Ingram, I sank into a chair next to John Mason, and Bolt stood at the end of the table.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, real deep and official, "Lieutenant Johnson has asked me to share with you some tragic news. This morning, police workers searched the foundation pit for your new gym. Among other things, they discovered, I regret to say, a body that is almost undoubtedly that of your colleague, Bess Richards. Her neck appears to be broken."

Liza Ingram sat back in her chair, hard. Georgie Reed blinked. John Mason dropped his fork.

"Oh no!" he said. "Bess? Are you sure?"

"We'll need confirmation," Bolt said smoothly, "but yes, quite sure. Now, let us establish what happened last night. Miss Reed, you said that at nine o'clock Mr. Alymer stopped by the room you shared with Miss Richards—was he already in his pajamas? Yes? Well, that fits. We believe he then went to his room but not to bed. Instead, he sat up, planning to reprimand Miss Richards when she returned. He had his bathrobe ready, draped over his chair. But about ten he saw something that upset him so much that he ran outside without his bathrobe. It wasn't a burglar—had it been, he would have summoned Mr. Kent. No, this was something he had to handle immediately—and personally. Any idea of what that might have been, Miss Reed?"

Georgie flushed and stared down at her plate. "Who, me? No. I mean, like I told you last night, I fell sound asleep right at nine. I didn't hear anything, and I didn't see anything."

"Ah, yes." Bolt nodded. "You didn't see anything. You volunteered that information last night, too, although it was not requested—Lieutenant Johnson had merely asked whether you'd heard gunshots. To quote the illustrious Hamlet—or, more precisely, the considerably less illustrious Gertrude—methinks the lady doth protest too much. Was it to disguise the fact that you *had* seen something? What had you seen, Miss Reed?"

"You hated her, Georgie," John Mason said, growling. "You were always spreading gossip about her, getting her in trouble. You were jealous because she was so much better looking."

"Was that the only reason for her jealousy, Mr. Mason?" Bolt asked. I was getting interested in the story. Without really realizing it, I helped myself to some grain-and-grape stuff. It didn't taste as bad as it looked—but then, what could?

"How the hell do I know?" John Mason asked, still growling. "Georgie's a nut case. Her brain stopped developing before she hit puberty. Who knows what goes on in her tiny little mind?"

Bolt cast a wry glance at Liza Ingram. "*Mens sana in corpore sano*, with the emphasis definitely on *corpore*'—that's the way you put it, and I fear your assessment was apt. Victor Alymer's regimen seems to have succeeded far better at developing sound bodies than at nurturing sound minds. As to your question, Mr. Mason, I merely meant Miss Reed obviously seems to desire your favors, and you seem obviously reluctant to grant them. She repels you because you find her physically unattractive. You value the physical above all else, don't you? You despise police officers because you consider them unfit; when the lieutenant asked for your impressions of Miss Richards, you responded with a physical description; and you volunteered contemptuous remarks about Miss Reed's appearance. Let's see—how did you put it? 'A dog,' did you say? 'Mangy'—was that the word? And you pointed out that one of her eyebrows is higher than the other."

Georgie Reed clamped both hands across her forehead, covering the eyebrows before I had a chance to check. "You creep, John," she cried. "How *could* you?"

"Perhaps you'd like to reconsider your statements about last night, Miss Reed," Bolt said. "*Did* you see anything?"

She glared at Mason. "Yeah. I didn't go to sleep after Victor left the room. I—I had insomnia. And a little after ten, I heard a noise in the hall and looked out, and there was John sneaking into his room." She took a deep breath. "His clothes were muddy. So there, you geek! I told, and I'm glad."

John Mason jumped up and pointed at her, his arm shaking. "See? She's doing it again. I *told* you she's always making stuff up and spreading stories, trying to get people in trouble."

"Yes, you did," Bolt agreed. "You told us that repeatedly, almost as if you were trying to discredit her because you were afraid of what she might tell us. Not that I question your assessment of her

character. But if Miss Reed is so eager to spread stories, isn't it odd that she didn't spread one to you last night? She had hot gossip—Miss Richards was out after hours. And her hatred for Miss Richards is as clear as her infatuation with you. After Mr. Alymer left her room, wouldn't Miss Reed naturally run straight to you, to tell you the woman you were attracted to was out late?"

"That's nuts," Mason said, and I had to agree it sounded thin. "Georgie never came to my room, never told me nothing. And I wasn't attracted to Bess."

"Oh, you must have been," Bolt said, shaking his head. "What else that could account for the vigor of Miss Reed's animosity toward her? She saw Miss Richards as a rival. And I can imagine your reaction when Miss Reed told you—as she surely would—that Miss Richards was probably out with a man you'd see as physically unworthy to compete with you. You were enraged, weren't you? You get enraged easily—the lieutenant and I had ample opportunity to observe that this morning when we questioned you. Your control over your emotions doesn't seem quite equal to your control over your body."

Mason winced, then swallowed hard and sat down, as if to prove he had good control after all. "Georgie's the one with no control," he said. "And like you said, she hated Bess, and she knew Bess was out late. Who says she didn't sneak out of the house, hide in the bushes, then jump Bess when she got home?"

"Who could say that, indeed?" Bolt agreed. "I, for one, am not ready to say that Miss Reed has been cleared of suspicion. Frankly, at this point I see this case as a tossup. Mr. Kent is not a suspect in this murder—if the coroner determines, as I am confident she will, that both Miss Richards and Mr. Alymer died around ten o'clock, Mr. Kent has an alibi. And, I might add, I had the honor of serving on the force with him and am convinced he is incapable of hurting anyone. Nor do I consider Miss Ingram a suspect. If she'll forgive me for saying so, I doubt that she is either foolish enough or passionate enough to commit a murder of this sort." He paused. "That leaves us with two people."

Even I could handle that much math. John Mason sat there silently, his face purpling and his hands clenched into fists. Georgie Reed looked terrified. "John's bigger," she said, her voice rising halfway to hysteria. "I mean, like, if somebody broke Bess's neck, it was probably John, because he's the strongest, right? And I *did*

go to his room last night, and I *did* tell him Bess was out late, and it *did* piss him off."

"Those are valid points," Bolt said, nodding, like he was at a meeting and had just heard a committee's report. "Mr. Mason is clearly the strongest person here. However, Miss Reed, I had the pleasure of watching you perform aerobics, if only briefly, and I'd guess you're agile and powerful enough to overpower another woman, especially if you took her by surprise. This might also be an opportune moment to mention your first response when the lieutenant announced that Victor Alymer had been shot. You said, '*Victor?*' in a tone of great surprise, almost as if you had expected him to announce the death of some other person. Had you perhaps expected to hear Miss Richards' name?"

"You bet she did," John Mason said, his voice quiet but filled with hatred. "Because she killed her."

"Perhaps," Bolt said mildly. "Or perhaps she suspected that *you* killed Miss Richards. Your own initial response last night also seems problematic. In a similarly surprised tone, you said '*Shot?*' One might infer that you knew Mr. Alymer was dead but had thought he died some other way—and that knowledge, for reasons I may explain later, could place you at the scene of the crime." He shook his head. "As I said, a tossup. Unless one of you cares to volunteer further information?"

Talk about tension! Eli Kent was so pale he actually looked his age, Liza Ingram seemed frozen, John Mason still had a purple face and clenched fists, Georgie Reed's shoulders shook with fear. And Bolt—well, Bolt looked genuinely puzzled. That had *me* shaking. It never takes him this long to figure out a murder. What if he couldn't manage it this time? What if he gave up, turned to me, asked me to announce that final conclusion he kept talking about? What if I actually had to solve a case myself?

My mouth went dry, but there was no water in sight, just some milky, foul-smelling stuff you couldn't give away in a desert. To make things worse, I had some of that grain-and-grape glop stuck in my throat, and it wanted to stay there.

Bolt looked to me in appeal. "I apologize, sir. That half-conscious feeling still eludes me. You'd better take over."

That did it. My throat closed around the lump of goo, and I gagged. Bolt's eyes shot wide open. He looked ready to leap across the table and give me a Heimlich.



I forced the lump down and waved Bolt back, trying to tell him that I didn't need help, that the gagging was just caused by all the tension. "Tense," I managed to gasp. "Tense!"

I sank back in my chair, exhausted by the attempt to get the word out. And Bolt—well, Michelangelo could have used him as a model for a painting of a saint having a vision. "Tense!" he cried. "Of course, sir! *That* was the elusive something I have endeavored all morning to grasp." He turned sharply on John Mason. "Miss Reed and Miss Ingram consistently spoke of Miss Richards in the present tense. But you—you slipped several times. 'She *was* a good-looking girl,' you said; 'she *was* a first-rate nurse.' Why would you use the past tense when you spoke of her unless you already knew she was dead?"

No prosecutor would buy that as proof. John Mason obviously did, though. Before I knew what was happening (and don't worry, Mother, I didn't get hurt), he bellowed, jumped up, grabbed me around the neck, pulled me up out of my chair, and snatched the gun from my holster. Then he backed away from the table, dragging me with him, the gun pressed against my skull so hard I thought it'd leave a dent. I couldn't think, couldn't fight, couldn't do anything except scuffle my heels against the floor.

"All right!" Mason shouted. "I never meant to hurt her—I just wanted to talk to her—but she said she'd never liked me, she said she loved that puny wimp, she opened that filthy paper bag and laughed at me and offered me a damn Twinkie. And I got mad, and it happened. Your lieutenant figured it out, Bolt, and now you're getting me out of it. You call your captain or your general or whatever it takes and get me a helicopter. I'm not letting go of your little pal until we're both safe in Iraq."

Not exactly a sensible plan, but what would you expect from Mason? Bolt was speechless—he looked more afraid than I'd ever seen him before. I took that as a personal compliment. Liza Ingram sat absolutely still, which was probably the smartest thing to do under the circumstances. Georgie Reed shrieked and slid under the table and sat there crying and hugging herself. And old Eli Kent got slowly to his feet and walked around the table toward us, his eyes fixed on Mason.

"You killed him," he said. "That's what Victor saw from his window. You, the one he liked best, the one he trusted to take over his Institute and carry on his ideas. You were hitting a girl. He ran outside to stop you—he raced down all those stairs, ran all the

way to the gate—but he was too late. He found you with her body in your hands. That's why he's dead."

Mason backed away from the table, his arm tightening around my neck. I tapped his arm politely to suggest he ease up, but he didn't notice. "Stay back, Eli," he said, "I'm warning you."

Kent kept coming closer. "I know you're not a bad person, John," he said. "I know you're sorry for what you've done. Don't end another young life. If you want a hostage, let the lieutenant go and take me."

At that point it struck me as an excellent suggestion. I arched my head back and looked up hopefully at Mason.

"No dice, Eli," he said. "You're a dried-up old watchman—the cops wouldn't think twice about letting you get shot. I want their young genius, the one who solves all their murders. No way are they taking a shot at me if I've got *him* as my shield."

I'll tell you, Mother, never before have I felt quite so bad about getting the credit for Bolt's successes. If I'd been able to speak, I'd have explained the whole situation to Mason. But I didn't get the chance. Kent kept moving forward.

"You'll never get out of here alive," he said, and I could tell he watches lots of old movies. "Give it up."

"Back off, Eli," Mason said. "I need *him*, but I don't need *you*. One step closer, and I shoot." He pulled the gun out of the little groove he'd made in my head and pointed it at Kent.

That was what Kent had been waiting for. With more spring than you'd expect from an old guy, he threw himself forward, grabbing the gun with one hand, Mason's throat with the other. Bolt leapt across the table, yelling like Bruce Lee, piling on top of us all, kicking and punching. Mason's grip on my throat loosened and I slid free, hitting the floor, trying to crawl the hell out of there. The gun went off once, twice, three times.

And that was it. The fight was over. I stood up and saw Eli Kent looking dazed, clasping his bleeding shoulder. Bolt was shaking his head sadly, not even his hair mussed. And John Mason was lying on the floor, two bullets through his heart, dead.

The doors to the dining room burst open, and the captain ran in, backed up by a dozen uniforms, all with guns drawn. "What the hell is this?" he demanded. "We heard shots."

Bolt, as usual in better shape than anyone else, stepped forward. "An unfortunate conclusion to a tragic incident, sir. The dead man is John Mason. He confessed to the murder of Bess Richards when

I, acting on Lieutenant Johnson's behalf, confronted him with the evidence of his misdeeds. He attempted to take the lieutenant hostage, but the lieutenant successfully resisted. Mr. Kent was wounded—only superficially, I trust—while rendering assistance.”

The captain looked around the room, trying to take it all in. “So Mason confessed to the Richards murder?” he said. “Well, it’s a shame he can’t stand trial, but it’s always good to cross a homicide off. And the other homicide, the Alymer shooting—how do you figure that one, Johnson? Alymer saw Mason killing Richards, so Mason shot him to keep him quiet?”

That seemed to fit with what Kent had said—he’d accused Mason of killing Alymer, hadn’t he? I glanced toward Bolt for guidance, and he nodded. “Sounds good to me,” I said, and sat down on the floor, exhausted.

After that, there were ambulances, paramedics, Kent being carried off on a stretcher and giving my hand a grateful squeeze on his way out. I just sat there, trying to catch my breath, and watched the coroner arrive, saw Bolt draw her off into a corner and plead with her, saw her finally shrug and nod her head and rip up a report she’d been carrying.

Bolt darted over to me. “The coroner will suppress her findings about the cause of Victor Alymer’s death,” he whispered. “She was at first reluctant, but I explained to her your feelings about the matter, and she agreed it would be a shame to stain Eli Kent’s record to no purpose. So John Mason will bear full responsibility for both deaths—as he should, sir, as no doubt in real justice he truly should. And the captain told me that he’s recommending Kent for a citizenship award, for coming to your rescue and assisting you when you shot Mason.”

I looked up at him, amazed. “I shot Mason?”

Bolt shrugged. “Well, well. Who knows who actually pulled the trigger, in all that confusion? The only clear prints the lab team could find on the gun were yours.”

Not exactly surprising, since it’s my gun and I’ve handled it a million times. But I hadn’t touched it once in that dining room—that much I know for sure. What I don’t know is who it was that actually saved my life—Eli Kent, or your boyfriend. It hardly matters, does it? They’re both great old guys.

Anyway, that night, when I was watching Letterman again, when Dave was halfway up the Top Ten list, it all of a sudden hit me. How could John Mason have shot Victor Alymer? None of his

guns had been fired in weeks, just like he said—the lab team proved that. Then I started to put together all those crazy things Bolt had said about CPR and congenital defects and Eli's being willing to do anything to protect Alymer's memory, and I felt sick. I'd helped to cover up a crime—at least, it *must* be a crime. Obstructing justice, or something. But Kent had looked so relieved, and Bolt had had tears in his eyes when he congratulated me on my compassion, and Mason is dead anyway. So, like Eli Kent would say, where's the harm?

I could still come forward and tell the truth—but as you know, Mother, I've never been especially good at that. I'm hoping you'll tell me that I don't have to.

Anyway, Ellen sends her best, and Kevin loved the photos and says it's great to have a grandmother who sends him cool stuff like that. I'm a little worried, though. I know you don't like it when I ask questions like this, but just where *were* you standing when you took those shots of the volcano erupting?

Your loving son,  
Walt

Dear Walt,

I'll tell you exactly where I was standing—in the best spot for getting a dramatic, educational photograph. *National Geographic* wouldn't have much use for me if I took pictures from my hotel window. And a policeman is a fine one to tell his mother that she ought to play it safe.

With regard to your other question, no, I don't think you should come forward with the full truth. If Gordon Bolt thinks you've done the right thing, you may rest assured you have. Don't worry about whether Mr. Kent committed an obscure misdemeanor. I know you're charged with enforcing the law, but you also ought to give at least an occasional thought to justice.

Mongolia's been fun, but it's beginning to seem rather old. I'll be leaving soon, probably heading home. Or I may go to Lebanon—my editor says the terrorists are acting up again, and that's a hard opportunity to resist. Say a few words to Gordon, won't you, to prepare him for the possibility? He sometimes has a bit of trouble understanding the career decisions made by

Your loving  
Mother

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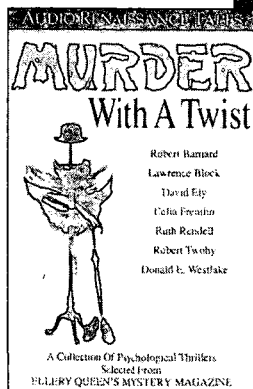
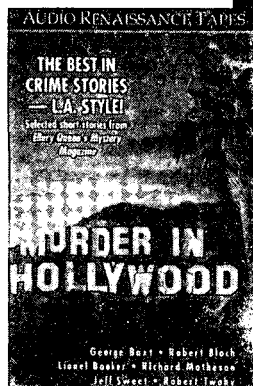
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# UNSOLVED

by  
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the April issue.*

The affair had its tense moments. It began when my country—Heroica—started testing its new atomic vessel in the harbor at Covert Cove. The gates and security guards protected the harbor itself, but the cliffs at End-of-All overlooked the whole operation. A tiny inn perched at the very brink of the high escarpment, which even during the tourist season had only an occasional visitor, suddenly overflowed with spies.

They came from all our traditional enemies—from Ulaga, Vermany, Wratly, Xanda, and Yoland. They were a noxious lot, deserving their code names of Ax, Blade, Cleaver, Dart, and Epee. Captivating Isabella, she of the flashing dark eyes and voluptuous figure, was the most heartless of the five. One of the men was named Frank, and one of the women was Ms. Narcom. They came singly in different cars; one drove a Fiat.

Despite our precautionary measures, some vital plans were stolen from the headquarters building at the harbor. My assignment was to recover them, doing whatever was necessary.

(1) I made my way around the many hairpin turns on my motorcycle, all the way up old End-of-All. Approaching the inn at the top, I noted a Citroën, a Peugeot, and a Volkswagen parked outside. I suspected they all belonged to the spies, and I was right. Stepping inside, I saw that Gilda, Mr. Kojaz, and the agent known as Epee had just arrived and were registering at the desk, undoubtedly under false names.

(2) Minutes later, two more cars wound their way up End-of-All. Cleaver and the gent from Wratly entered the inn.

(3) Ax, Jack, and Mr. Landau (one of whom is from Vermany and another owned the Porsche) eyed Epee and Ms. Marx suspiciously from across the lobby.

(4) At dinner that evening, Mr. O'Shea, Ax, and the owner of the Peugeot shared one table. I sat down with the other two, but they declined to be drawn into conversation.

(5) That night the two women shared a room at the north end of the upstairs. Blade and the agent from Xanda shared the south room. The driver of the Porsche and I each occupied a room in between. I spent a rather restless night.

(6) At breakfast the following morning, I learned that Henry was not the man who owned the Citroën.

(7) While the suspects were away that morning, I bugged their rooms. It proved to be a wise move. Around noon I heard four of them having an animated discussion.

Gilda was saying, "... but I thought we agreed to cooperate in this caper, sell the plans to the highest bidder, and split the take. Well, I don't have the plans."

"I know you don't," snapped the agent from Xanda. "I searched your room during the night."

Ms. Marx uttered a nervous little giggle, "You did? And I was right there and slept through it all!"

"Let's get to business," growled the man from Yoland. "We've searched one another and all four of us are clean. It *has* to be that contemptible Dart. But Gilda and I went through his room thoroughly, and the plans aren't there."

"Oh," said Ms. Marx, "I saw him putting something in the glove compartment of his car. You don't suppose—"

I didn't wait to hear more. I yanked off the headset and dashed outside. In seconds I found where the precious plans were hidden—right there in that car. As the angry spies rushed out the door, I leaped on my motorcycle and sped pell-mell down the twisting road to headquarters. Thus ended my part in the intrigue at End-of-All.

*In what car did I find the stolen plans?*

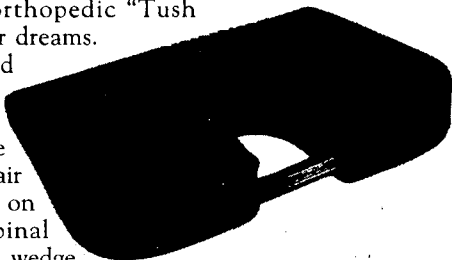


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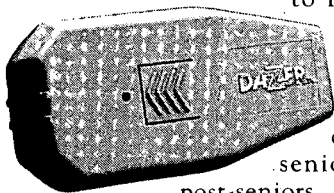
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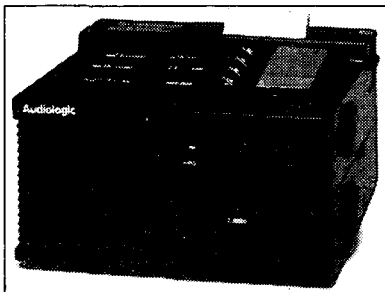
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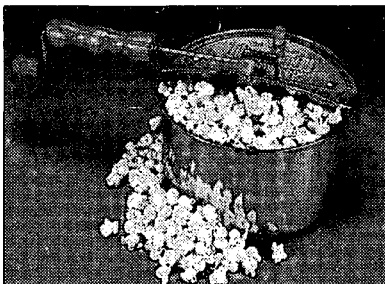
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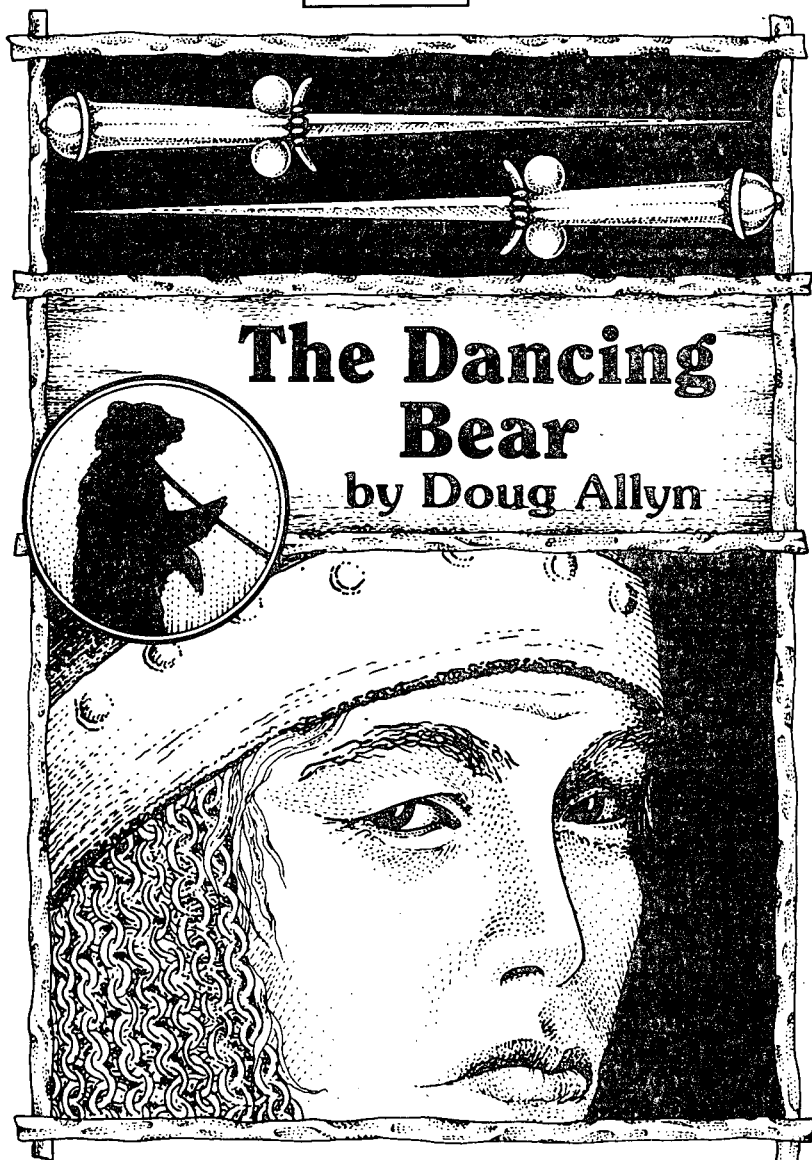
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FICTION



*Illustration by Laurie Davis*

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**T**he inn was a sorry place with walls of wattle and daub and a lice-ridden thatch roof in dire need of repair. The light within was equally poor, no proper candles, only tallow bowls and even a few Roman lamps that were probably cast aside when the last legions abandoned these Scottish borderlands to the Picts six hundred years ago. Still, logs were blazing in the hearth, the innkeeper had recently slaughtered a hog, and there were guests to entertain. I was content to strum my lute and sing for sausages and a place near the fire. The few coins to be earned in such a hovel weren't worth the risk. With five kings contending in Scotland and the Lionheart abroad, banditry ruled the roads.

The guests were a mixed lot, a pedlar of tinware, an elderly man and his wife on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, a crew of thatchers drifting south in search of work, two farmboys taking an ox to market.

The only person of any substance was a young soldier, a returned crusader from the boiled look of him. He wore a well-crafted chain mail shirt beneath his linen surcoat, and his broadsword was German steel, carried in a bearskin sheath across his back in the

old Scottish style. He was tall with unkempt, sandy hair and a scraggly blond beard. His skin was scorched scarlet as a slab of beef, and his eyes were no more than slits. Perhaps they'd been narrowed by the desert sun. Or perhaps they'd seen too much.

He kept to himself, away from the camaraderie of the fire, though he did applaud with the others when I made up a roundelay that described each of the guests in a verse. But his countenance darkened again when I sang "The Cattle Raid at Cooley," an Irish war ballad popular in this border country. The innkeeper was an affable fellow, but I noticed he kept a weather eye on the moody young soldier. As did I.

But he was no trouble. As I gently plucked the opening notes to "The Song of Roland," the crusader lowered his head to the table and dozed off. The ballad is a hymn to the fallen stalwarts of mighty Charlemagne who died for honor. It's a song I sing well, but barely a quarter through it, I noticed the eyes of my listeners straying. Annoyed, I followed their glances.

In the shadows in the corner, the young soldier was on his feet. And he was dancing, shuffling round and round in the smoky darkness. At first I

thought he was responding to my music, but his eyes were clenched tight and his steps were graceless. If he was hearing music, it was not mine. My voice died away, but still he danced, lost within himself. And we watched, in silence, bewitched. And for just a moment I felt a feather touch of a memory. There was something familiar about his movements, something I'd seen before. But I could not call it to mind. After a time I quietly took up my song again, though to little effect. I doubt anyone heard a word.

The young crusader stumbled back into his seat and his slumber before I finished singing, but the sense of fellowship around the fire was gone. Uneasy, avoiding each other's eyes, we each of us found places, wrapped our cloaks about us and so to sleep. But not for long.

Living on the road has sharpened my senses, if not my wits. Sometime in the night I heard a muffled footstep and snapped instantly awake, my glance flicking about the room like a bat.

Movement. In the corner. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I could see the young soldier. Dancing. His eyes were partly open, but there was no light in them, no awareness. And his

face was a twisted mask of anguish. And yet he danced, shuffling in a mindless circle like a . . .

Bear.

And I remembered where I'd seen this dance before. In the marketplace of Shrewsbury when I was a boy. It was a feast day and there was a fair, with jugglers and minstrels and a puppet show. And near the village gate was a man with a chained bear, a great brown hulk of a brute with a mangy coat. The man would prod it with a stick and sing a doggerel verse, and the bear would rear upright and shuffle in a circle, pawing the air. And the man would swat it and caper about as though the two were dancing.

I was enchanted, awed by the power this ragamuffin minstrel had over his monstrous beast. When he worked the crowd, I paid him my only copper to see the bear dance again. And I gradually lost my fear of the animal and moved closer. Only then did I realize why the minstrel had no fear of it. The bear's claws had been ripped out, and his eyes seared with coals. He was blind.

I cried all the way home and poured out my heart to my father. Who cuffed me for whining. Perhaps rightly. But later that night I hid a blade beneath

my jerkin and skulked back to the marketplace, determined to rescue the bear somehow. But the fair was finished and they were gone. I never saw him again. Until tonight. For the young soldier's dance reminded me strongly of the ghost bear of my boyhood. He too shuffled in his circle, blind to his surroundings. The difference was that if the soldier opened his eyes, he could see.

When I opened mine again, he was gone. As were the thatchers and the farmboys and even their ox. Only the old pilgrims and I had slept past the dawn, and they were packing to leave as I stirred myself. Perhaps I could have stayed another night, earned another meal, but the inn felt haunted to me now. I slung my lute o'er my shoulder, bade the innkeeper good day, and set out.

The day was fine, a brassy October morn, heather crunching beneath my shoes and curlews crying. I'd summered to the north in Strathclyde, singing in inns and village fairs, but winter was on the wing, and I wished to be far south of these border hills when it came. In England. Perhaps even at home in Shrewsbury.

Or perhaps not. A mile or so from the inn, I came to a fork in the trail. The young soldier was resting there, seated com-

fortably on a knoll above the path, his blade across his knees.

"Good morning, minstrel," he nodded. "I've been waiting for you."

"Good morning to you," I said. In the light of day he seemed older. Not his face, which despite his beard was boyish and unseamed, but his eyes. . . . "Waiting?" I said. "Why?"

"To offer you employment," he said. "I journey west to the Clyde, to a town called Sowerby. A small place, but lively. I should like to hire you to perform there, and a troubador of your skill will surely find other work as well."

"Thank you, no," I said. "I'm traveling south."

"To those of us who drift on the wind, one road is much like another, is it not? Come with me. I have need of your talent, and I can pay. In advance if you like." He rose, blotting out the sun with his shoulders. And for a moment he was again the blinded bear of my boyhood. And my dreams. And he was asking for my help.

"Keep your money," I said with a shrug, offering him my hand. "I'm Tallifer of Shrewsbury, minstrel and poet. And the price of my company is a riddle. Why does a man dance

like a bear in the dark when no music plays?"

"I am Arthur Gunn," he said, accepting my hand. "Of Clyde, and the Holy Land. I, ah, danced last night?"

"That you did. A curious thing to see," I said as we set off on the path to the west. "Tell me the story of it."

"You should have taken the coins," he smiled. "There's nought wondrous about it. I followed the cross and King Richard to Acre, and I was captured by Saracens in a raid in '91 south of Caesarea, myself and a dozen more."

"People say they are cruel captors."

"Not unlike ourselves," he said dryly. "They led us east, into the wastes. By chance, one of the captured was a bastard son of Hugh of Burgundy, and so a band of French horse dogged us like hounds."

"And after a few days, the Saracens began to kill us. Not from malice, but to save water. Each night when we camped the guards would look us over and slaughter those who looked too weak to go on before giving water to the rest. I was young and very afraid, so when they approached me, I would rise and shuffle about to show I was hale. And worthy of a sip of water. Of living another day. As the chase stretched on, we all

went half mad from thirst and exhaustion. And if a man fell on the trail and was killed, I would dance over him. To prove I was stronger, you see. That I was still alive. So my friends died, and I . . . danced."

He fell silent, his face dark with memories.

"It must have been terrible," I said. "What happened?"

"On the twelfth day, young Burgundy died, and I knew the pursuit would end when they found him. I had wasted a bit so my shackles were not so tight, nor did the guards check as closely as before, for they were exhausted, too. That night I chewed my arm and dripped blood onto my ankle till it was oily enough to slip my chain. I must've fled into the desert, though I honestly don't remember. The French said I was dancing when they found me. Alone, on the sand."

"Perhaps it will pass now that you are returned?"

"It has abated somewhat," he agreed. "It only happens when I drink too much, or get overtired. With luck the winds of Scotland will blow my ghosts away altogether."

"I hope so," I said earnestly. "A happier question. What song do you wish me to sing? To your family? Or a lass, perhaps?"



"I've no family, and as for a lass, I'm not sure," he said, brightening. "Before I left, my best friend and I fought over a woman, a tanner's daughter we'd both lain with. Nearly killed each other, but by God she was worth the fight. Hair dark as a raven's wing, eyes like opals, and a heat about her . . ."

"You still care for her, then?"

"Who knows?" He shrugged. "It's been long years. I lost to Duncan fair and square and went off crusading. I expect they are married now with a brood. Whatever their situation, I want you to make up a song to suit it as you did last night. And whether it's a wedding gift or a peace offering, say the trouble between us is forgotten, and I would be his friend again."

"And if he chooses not to forget the trouble?"

"Then perhaps you'll have to sing a dirge for one of us," he said mildly.

"That's all very well for you," I grumbled. "But dirges are difficult to sing. And if you kill each other, who will pay me?"

**S**owerby was larger than I expected, a walled market town sprawled haphazard along a riverbank, with a branch of the Clyde running through it. The village gate

was guarded but open, and we passed through without being challenged. Within, all was abustle. There were two smithies with hammers ringing and sparks dancing aloft, a tannery, an alehouse, and a pottery shop with goods displayed on planks in front. A water-driven gristmill was built into the town's outer wall, rumbling like distant thunder as its great wheel turned.

The village houses were mostly thatch or wattle and daub, with a few built of stone. In the south corner, the castle keep loomed above all, a crude but substantial blockhouse built of stone atop a natural hill in the Norman style. Its corners were outset so archers could sweep its walls.

Two herds of horses were tethered just outside the inner ward gate, with guardsmen and merchants looking them over.

"Horse traders," Arthur offered, "from Menteith and Lennox if I recall their livery right. We've come at a good time, minstrel. There will be celebrating—"

"Arthur! Arthur Gunn?" A guards captain stepped away from a group of traders and strode toward us. He was a striking man, half a head taller than Gunn, bearded and dark as a Saracen. He wore a

brimmed steel helmet and the livery of Sowerby over a mailed coat. His fist grasped the hilt of his broadsword as he came, from habit, I hoped.

He halted in front of Arthur, looking him over, his face unreadable. And then before Arthur could react, the captain seized him by the waist and lifted him aloft.

"God's eyes, Arthur," he grinned, "I thought you'd be dead with your head on a pike by now."

"I may be yet," Arthur said. "Or have you forgotten what happened the last time we spoke?"

The smile remained on the captain's face, but it no longer lit his eyes. "No," he said, lowering Arthur to the ground. "I've not forgotten. A word, Arthur, alone."

They wandered off a few paces, heads together, the captain whispering earnestly. I busied myself examining a row of pots, trying to appear uninterested, but I whirled about with my hand on my dirk when I heard Arthur shout.

But he was laughing. Both of them were, arm in arm, tears streaming, laughing like boys at the greatest joke in the world. I think Arthur would've fallen if the captain hadn't held him up. It appeared my song of peace wouldn't be needed. Just

as well. Yet I'd have felt better about it if the burly guard captain's laughter had been less fierce.

"Tallifer, this is the old friend I told you about, Duncan Pentecost. A captain now, Duncan?"

"Aye. Promotion comes easy when the best men are off to the Holy Land. You've come at a good time, minstrel. Laird Osbern and his lady have come down from Pentland to look at stock. There's a feast tonight, and our steward's beside himself trying to organize an entertainment. His name's Geoffrey. Tell him I sent you and that you come highly recommended."

"You're most kind," I said.

"Not at all. Arthur says you're a fine singer, and his word has always been good with me. And now I'd best get back to the mounts before Simon of Lennox skins my lord's marshal out of his house and first-born daughter. I'll see you both tonight at the feast. And, Arthur, welcome home."

He strode back to the horse traders.

"A fair-sized man," I observed.

"So he is," Arthur agreed. "If we'd had trouble, it might have ended as it did before. Still, I was glad for your company, Tallifer. And I wish to pay you

for the song, even though you didn't have to sing it."

"No need," I said. "With your friend's help I'll find profit enough to make my trip worthwhile. And as you said, to those who drift with the wind, one road's the same as another. I'd better be off in search of Geoffrey the steward."

"And I'll find our lodging," Arthur said. "Duncan offered us beds in a barracks room in the castle. You'll stay with me?"

"Are you sure you want me to? Isn't there someone else here you must see?"

"Someone else?"

"The woman, you clot. The one you and Duncan fought over. Is she his wife now?"

"No," he said, trying not to grin and failing. "He's unmarried. And the woman . . . is dead, minstrel. Forget her. I'll see you later."

He strode off, chuckling quietly to himself. Crazy by grief over his lost love, no doubt. Hair dark as a raven's wing . . . I shook my head and set off to find Laird Osbern's steward.

**T**he evening feast was a small one, a courtesy to the traders who'd gathered rather than a display of wealth by the Laird of Pentland and Sowerby, Solmund Osbern. There was food

aplenty, but plain. Cold plates of venison and hare and partridge, wooden bowls of thick bean porridge flavored with leeks and garlic. The laird and his family sat at the linen-draped high table, a small army of them, four grown sons, their wives, the local reeve, and a priest. Two low tables of rude planks extended from the corners of the high table to form a rough horseshoe shape, which was appropriate since horses were the topic of the day.

In England, strict protocols of station would have been rigidly observed, but these Scots were more like an extended family, with jests and jibes flying back and forth between high and low tables. Indeed, I'd seen Laird Osbern himself that afternoon haggling like a fishmonger with a red-bearded trader from Lennox over a yearling colt. The laird was on in years, nearly sixty, folk said. He was gaunt of face and watery-eyed, but still formidable for all that. He'd gotten the best of the bargaining without adding the weight of his title to the scales.

His sons were a dour crew, wary and hard-eyed as bandits. They were dressed in coarse wools, little better than commoners'. They conversed courteously enough with their guests but kept wary eyes on

them. They were fiercely deferential to their sire, though less so to his lady, I thought.

Lady Osbern was clearly not the laird's first wife, for she was a strikingly handsome woman younger than his sons. Richly clad in fur-trimmed emerald velvet, she had the canny eyes and grace of a cat. She stayed demurely at Osbern's elbow, saying little and that only to her husband, but I doubt there was a man in the room who wasn't aware of her. Or a woman either.

As I'd been hired last, I sang last, for such are the protocols of minstrelsy. I wasn't displeased at the order of things, since Scots afeeding can be a damned surly audience. Later, with full bellies and oiled with ale, they're a ready and roisterous crowd. I won them over early with a maudlin love ballad I'd learned in Strathclyde, then followed with "The Cattle Raid at Cooley." Even Laird Osbern joined in at the last chorus, with a full, if unsteady, baritone, and the guests roared their approval at the finish.

To a wandering singer like myself, such times are the true compensation for my craft, fair payment for the chancy life of the road, the loneliness, the lack of home and family. I was glowing like a country bridegroom, singing at my best, the

circle of rowdy Scots cheering me on. And so chose my best tune next, "The Song of Roland." A mistake.

Half through it I began to hear murmurs and muffled laughter. I glanced behind me as I strolled the room. It was Arthur. He'd been sitting at low table with Duncan Pentecost, but now he was up, his face flushed with wine, eyes closed, dancing his mindless shuffle, round and round, my bear on a chain. It would've been funny if it were not for the agony so plain in his face. I skipped to the last verse of the song, thinking that if I ended it quickly, he might end his dance. But I was too late.

A trader from Menteith, a wiry rat of a man, staggered from his seat and began capering about Arthur, making sport of him. With a roar, Duncan Pentecost vaulted a table, seized the wretch by the throat, and hurled him back amongst his friends.

In a flash men were up, blades drawn, squaring off, ready for slaughter.

"Hold!" Laird Osbern roared. "I'll hang the first man who draws blood in my hall. Sheath your blades, sirs, or by God's eyes, ye'll answer to me and my sons."

"Your captain struck me for no good reason," the rat-faced trader complained.

"You were mocking a better man than you'll ever be," Duncan said. "And if you and your lot want satisfaction, come ahead on, one at a time or all together—"

"Shut your mouth, Duncan," Osbern snapped. "These men are guests. I've given you no leave to fight anyone. Now, what's wrong with this lad? Is he mad?"

"No, my lord," I said hastily, seizing Arthur's arm. He had stopped circling and was looking about, confused. "He's newly home from the Holy Land. He has no head for wine."

"Then see him to bed and let him sleep it off. As for you, Duncan, hie yourself up to keep tower and relieve the watchman there. The night air will cool your temper."

For a moment I thought Pentecost was going to refuse and charge into the traders. But he didn't. He visibly swallowed his anger, then nodded. "Yes, my lord. As you say." He wheeled and stalked out.

"And that, sirs, is the end to it. We can't fall to brawling in front of our good ladies like a pack of damned Vikings. We're friends here. So," he said, raising his tankard, "will you join me, gentlemen? Here's tae us. Wha's like us?"

In the hallway I heard the roar of approval as Osbern's

guests answered his toast. The din seemed to startle Arthur into awareness.

"What's happened?" he mumbled, blinking.

"Nothing," I said, leading him into the barracks room and easing him down on a pallet. "Everything's all right."

"The laird was shouting at Duncan," he said, frowning, trying to remember. "Was there trouble because of me?"

"Nothing that can't be mended. Go to sleep, Arthur, we'll put things right in the morning."

But apparently he couldn't wait. Later that night, I woke to the scuff of a footstep, and saw Arthur go out.

**I**n the morning his bed was empty. I stirred myself and set off for the kitchen, in search of news and perhaps a crust of bread. But before I reached it, I heard shouts of alarm, and a guardsman pounded down the corridor past me. I followed him at a walk. Trouble finds me quick enough without hurrying toward it.

A crowd was clustered near the milltower in the outer bailey wall. I threaded through them close enough to see. It was Arthur, my bear. He lay crumpled against the stone wall, his limbs twisted at impossible angles, his body bro-

ken like a crushed insect in the muddy street. His cloak was torn and bloodstained, and his poor face was shattered, bits of bone and teeth gleaming bloody in the morning sun.

There was a stir behind me as Duncan Pentecost thrust his way through the crowd. He was hatless and bleary-eyed, doubtless roused from sleep after his long nightwatch. He knelt beside Arthur's body and gently closed his friend's eyes with his fingertips. Then he tugged Arthur's bloody cloak up to cover his head and turned to face the crowd. And those near him took a step back at the killing rage in his eyes. The others parted as Laird Osbern strode up with two of his sons and several of the Lennox and Menteith traders. "What's happened here?" Osbern asked.

"My friend's been beaten to death," Duncan said coldly. "And I tell you now, my lord, the cowards who did this will not see their pigsty homes again."

"You accuse us of this killing, captain?" the redbearded Lennoxman said, outraged.

"Perhaps not you personally, Simon of Lennox. But my friend was a soldier. It would take several men to break him like this. And he had no enemies here but your lot."

"We had no trouble with him, Pentecost. Only with you."

"But I was out of your reach last night. Perhaps some of you chanced on Arthur and took out your anger on him."

"Gentlemen," I interjected quietly. "Before this goes further, I think you should look at the body more closely. Arthur was not killed here."

"What do you mean?" Duncan said, whirling to face me as I knelt near the corpse. "Of course he was. And what would a singer know of such matters anyway?"

"I was a soldier before I was a singer," I said, rising. "I've seen death many times in many guises. And I tell you Arthur was not killed where he lies now."

"I don't care if he was killed in Araby," Simon of Lennox said. "I'll not have my men accused of murder by—"

"Curb your tongues and tempers a moment," the laird snapped. "You, minstrel, why do you say he was not killed here?"

"He's been brutally savaged, my lord, and his limbs are broken. If it had happened here, there would be blood spattered on the wall and the ground. But only his cloak is bloodsoaked."

"He's right," Laird Osbern's eldest son put in. "There is no

blood about, or at least not enough for the damage done."

"True enough," the laird said, eyeing me shrewdly. "You arrived with the dead man, didn't you, minstrel? He was your friend?"

"Yes, my lord, he was."

"And you know no one else here, no friends or kinsmen?"

"No, lord."

"Then perhaps I see a way past this," Osbern nodded. "The traders planned to leave at midday. If I delay them, it might be said I'm making an excuse to seize their property. Since you are a stranger here, with neither friends *nor* allies," he added pointedly, "perhaps you can be relied on to give a fair accounting. My son Ruari will stay with you to lend you authority. Go where you like, question whom you like. If you discover who has done this to your friend, they shall pay dearly for it. But, minstrel, take care not to accuse anyone falsely. For that would be as great an offense as this. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord," I said, swallowing. "I will do what I can."

"And do it quickly," Osbern said. "I'll not risk war with Lennox over one death, however unfortunate. At midday, we'll have done with this whether you discover anything or no. And now, shall we see to

our breakfast, gentlemen? I'd hate to hang a man on an empty stomach."

He strode off, trailed by the others. Duncan held back a moment, but at Osbern's pointed glance, he followed.

Young Osbern and I looked each other over warily. He was a bull of a youth, beetle-browed and round-shouldered, with a shaggy mane of dark hair. He wore the plain leather jerkin and pants of a yeoman. Save for his boots, which were finely made, he looked quite ordinary. He'd spoken up boldly about the blood, though, and his eyes were clever as a ferret's.

"So, minstrel," he said, "whom shall we talk to first?"

"The dead man," I said, kneeling beside Arthur's body. I pulled his cloak away from his face and swallowed. It was terrible to see. His skull was crushed, the bone showing clearly through the gash.

"His face has been smashed like a melon," Ruari said, wincing.

"And yet there's very little bleeding from it," I said. "I think he was probably dead already when this occurred."

"His cloak is quite soaked," Ruari said, reaching past me to tug the cloak from beneath the body. Beneath it his coat of mail gleamed dully, except in the small of his back, where it



was darkly stained. "Odd. His armor appears intact."

"So it does," I said, tugging the mailed shirt up above the bloodstain, to reveal a puncture wound in the small of his back. "There. That is how he was killed."

Ruari knelt, gingerly touching the hole with his fingertips, in part, I think, to show he wasn't afraid. "I've seen this sort of wound before," he said slowly, "or one similar to it. A spike dagger, needle-bladed to slide through chain mail. That's why his armor is unmarred."

"Who would have such a blade?"

"I don't know," Ruari said. "It's an uncommon weapon. I doubt any of the traders own one."

"What about your father's men?"

"Nor them either," he said. "The blade's too thin to be of use in a fight. A man at arms might carry one into battle to finish a fallen enemy, but it's good for little else."

"Aye," I said. "And Arthur wore no helmet. Since he was struck from behind, he could have been killed as easily with a broadsword, or even with a cudgel. Why use a dagger at all?"

"Or break his bones after? Someone must have hated him greatly."

"Perhaps not. Perhaps he wasn't beaten. His bones could have been broken in a fall."

"From the milltower, you mean? Not likely. A man might break a limb, but not much more."

"But suppose he fell from the castle keep, and struck hard on the slope above us? He might tumble outward to land where he lies now."

"The keep? But what would he be doing there?"

"I don't know. What's directly above us?"

"The armory. But it would've been locked last night."

"Then perhaps I'm wrong. But if he did fall from above, there should be a mark of some kind on the rocks. He would have struck with great force."

"Aye, so he would," Ruari nodded thoughtfully, looking up at the rocky face that slanted steeply down from the stone towers above. "And it would have to be somewhere near the foot of the wall . . ."

He was climbing before he finished his thought, scrambling up the cliff face like a Barbary ape. A few rods below the ashlar facing of the wall he paused, glanced down to get his bearings, then began inching to his left among the rocks.

And then he stopped. He turned cautiously and looked down at me. And raised his

hand. And even in the deep shadows of the keep above, I could see his palm was stained with blood.

**I**t was still an hour until noon when Ruari and I strode together into the great hall. The tables were as generously laden with cold game and trenchers as they had been the previous evening, but the mood was taut as a strung bow and no one was eating much. The traders from Lennox and Menteith were seated together, shoulder to shoulder, as though they were ringed by wolves.

And perhaps rightly, for there were a half dozen men at arms arrayed behind Laird Osbern, Duncan Pentecost was guarding the door, and armed yeomen were posted at intervals around the room. Save for Lady Osbern, who sat at her husband's left, no women were present at all.

"Father, gentlemen," Ruari began, but the laird waved him to silence.

"Have you discovered the truth of what happened to the crusader?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. Perhaps."

"Then let the minstrel tell it. If trouble comes from what is said here, on his head be it. Come, stand by me."

Ruari glanced at me, shrugged, and did as he was bid. Leaving me alone in the center of the room. "Now, minstrel, what did you find?"

"We found, my lord, that Arthur Gunn was murdered, struck from behind with a thin blade. A spike dagger."

"A spike dagger?" Osbern echoed, frowning.

"Yes, my lord. And further, he was not killed in the street where he was found. He was killed in the keep, either in the armory or near it, and his body thrown from the wall there."

"The keep? But there was no one up there, save my family and—"

"And Duncan Pentecost," I finished, "who was on duty there." I sensed a movement from behind me, where Duncan stood at the door.

"But Duncan was the lad's friend," Osbern scoffed. "He stood up for him at the feast, ready to fight half the room on his behalf."

"That is true, my lord. Duncan was his friend. In fact, he was the only close friend he had here. And thus the only one he would likely have gone to visit in the night. Where Duncan stood watch. In the keep tower."

"But the stairway guard—"

"Admitted to me that he had a bit too much ale last night,"

Ruari put it. "He likely was asleep when the crusader went past."

"But even so, Duncan and the crusader were friends."

"And sometimes even friends can fall out," I said quietly. "Over a woman."

"Enough!" Lady Osbern's voice cracked like a whip. "Duncan, will you just stand there and let this English vagabond dirty your name with his lies? He's all but called you murderer—"

"Gentlemen, I am not armed," I said, backing away. "Nor have I accused anyone."

"Duncan! Hold your place, sir!" Laird Osbern snapped. "Madam, forgive me for being such a lout. You're quite right, our hall is no fit place for such talk. And as you gentlemen of Lennox and Menteith have been found blameless, you are no doubt eager to be on your way, are you not?"

"Yes, my lord," Simon of Lennox said hastily, arising. "We have imposed on your hospitality too long already. By your leave we shall be off straight-away."

"Of course. Godspeed to you, Simon, and to all of you. My dear," Osbern said, smiling benignly at his lady, "all this talk has upset you. Perhaps you should retire and rest a bit. Alwyn! See your stepmother to

her rooms. As to this other matter, Ruari, minstrel, Duncan, come with me."

He turned and stalked from the hall. I followed, and Ruari pointedly fell into step between Pentecost and myself. Osbern led us a considerable distance from the great hall to a tower guard room with arrow slits for windows and an oaken door.

"Ruari, wait out here and see we're not interrupted. By anyone." He closed the door and turned slowly to face us.

"And now, sirs, we are quite alone. And I will have the truth, from both of you. Minstrel, what did you find up there?"

"Bloodstains on the stones, my lord, near the armory. And on the wall. Arthur was killed there, and his body thrown down."

"I see. And you, Duncan, what have you to say?"

"It was . . . as the minstrel says, my lord," Pentecost said, swallowing. "Arthur and I fell out years ago, before he went crusading. And last night . . . we argued again."

"And you stabbed him from behind? Dishonorably? With a spike dagger? Is that what you are telling me?"

"Yes, my lord."

"I see. And you carry such a blade ordinarily, do you?"

"No, lord, I was . . . he found me in the armory, and we argued, and as he turned to leave, I, ah, I seized the dagger from a workbench. And struck him."

"You seized the dagger. You didn't draw your own blade and order your friend to defend himself? And yet a few hours earlier you were ready to fight for him. But never mind. This Arthur Gunn came upon you in the armory, you argued, and you killed him. From behind," Laird Osbern said, moving closer to Pentecost until their faces were only inches apart. "And was there, by chance, a witness to any of this, Duncan?"

"Witness, my lord?"

"I'm asking if you were alone when he found you?"

"Yes, my lord," Pentecost said, avoiding the old man's eyes. "Quite alone. I'd gone there to get out of the wind."

"Enough," Osbern said, turning away. "You've killed a man who was my guest, Duncan. I could have you gutted in the courtyard for that alone. But that would only cause my—family further upset. So I offer you a sporting chance, Pentecost. Go from this place, now. Take a mount, but no weapons. In two hours' time, armed men will follow. With orders to kill you on sight. Unless, of course, you have something further to

offer in your defense. A mitigating circumstance, perhaps?"

"No, my lord. I have nothing more to say. Now or ever."

"Then be off. Forgive me if I don't wish you luck."

Duncan turned without a word and stalked out. Osbern eyed me for a moment in silence, then shrugged. "So, minstrel, are you satisfied that justice has been done for your friend's death?"

"Yes, my lord. And he wasn't a friend, really, only a companion of the road."

"I see. He behaved strangely last night, but he seemed harmless enough. People tell me you've been at court, minstrel. In London?"

"Yes, lord."

"Then you must have seen many beautiful women. And what do you think of my lady?"

I hesitated a heartbeat. I've been wounded in battle and once I was trapped in a burning stable, but I've never felt nearer death than at that moment. It was in the old man's eyes. I wondered if I would leave the room alive.

"Your wife is truly lovely, my lord. Her hair gleams like a raven's wing, her eyes glow like opals."

"Spoken like a poet," Osbern said dryly, "but that wasn't my point. Any fool can see she's beautiful. It's her . . . deport-

ment that troubles me. Speaking out of turn as she did today, for example. She's not nobly born, you see. She was only a tanner's daughter. But as my sons are grown and the succession is assured . . . I indulged myself and married for love. And even now, God help me, I do not regret it. Still, a man of my station must maintain certain standards, must he not?"

"As you say, my lord."

"I have an aunt," he said, musing to himself more than to me. "A horse-faced old crone, married to the church. She is abbess of a grim little convent in the highlands north of Pentland. Perhaps I'll send my lady there for a rest. And to learn proper behavior. A few months with my aunt would teach a mule manners. As to the matter of your friend's death, there's still one minor point that troubles me. This woman Duncan and his friend fought over. What do you know of her?"

"Only that she is dead," I said carefully. "Arthur told me she died long ago."

"Did she indeed? What a pity. She must have been very comely to cause all this trouble from beyond the grave."

"We do not know for certain that the argument *was* over the woman, my lord. We have only Duncan's word for that. Per-

haps they fought over something else. Men sometimes kill each other over a penny or a look. Or nothing at all."

"So they do," he nodded, satisfied. "You've a glib tongue, minstrel. And you're quick with a song as well. And will you sing of what happened here?"

"No, my lord," I said positively. "A friend murdering a friend over a trifle is no fit subject for a song. It's best forgotten."

"Truly," he said, gazing out the arrow slit. "Best forgotten. Will you be tarrying long in this country, do you think?"

"No, lord. My home is far to the south, and winter is coming on. I'd best be on my way."

"Very wise," he said, without looking at me. "Godspeed to you, minstrel."

I strolled out of Sowerby that afternoon at a leisurely pace, whistling as I went. Until I was out of sight of the watchtower. Then I plunged into the wood and struck hard to the east, running full out as long as I could, then slowing to a steady, mile-eating trot. I found a stream just at dusk, but instead of using the ford, I waded downstream until well after moonrise, finally leaving it many miles below where I'd entered.

Was I being overcautious? Perhaps. But I'd seen Ruari and a band of men-at-arms set out after Duncan in far less time than the two hours the old laird had promised. And I had little doubt that when they'd finished with him, they'd be hunting me.

The old laird knew damned well Duncan hadn't killed his friend over nothing. Arthur had gone to the keep looking for Duncan in the middle of the night. And found him in the armory. But not alone. He was almost certainly with Lady Osbern. Perhaps she'd even struck the blow that killed him. And now Arthur was dead, and Duncan soon would be. And I was the last one who might spread the tale. A proud old man with a young, passionate wife fears the sound of laughter more than death itself. He will do anything, even murder, to stop it.

I maintained my killing pace all through the night and the next day. Late that evening, I forded the Tweed into England. Perhaps Osbern's men would not pursue me so far south, but the Tweed is only a river and

the border only a line on a map. And Laird Osbern was a tall man with a long reach. I pushed on through the night.

The morning broke clear, a golden October dawn that melted away the shadows and my fears. As the sun climbed slowly through the morn, my spirits rose with it. I was exhausted but too numb to feel much pain. And so I walked on.

And just before midday, a breeze came wafting out of the east, swirling leaves and dirt into a dust devil that seemed to dance ahead of me on the road, leading me on. On a whim, I tried to join in with it, whirling round and round, capering about like a mating partridge. Or a dancing bear.

I shuffled in a circle until my legs finally gave way and I sank to my knees in the road. Still the dust devil danced on ahead. Beckoning me to follow. But not to the south and home.

To the west. Toward Ireland. A land of poets, they say.

I knew of no towns that lay in that direction. But there was a path of sorts. And to those who drift with the wind, one road is much like another.

FICTION

# A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY

by William T. Lowe



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Count the silver. It was always a habit when I was in service at Mimosa Hall, and even though I've been dead for fifty years, I still do it. Count the spoons with the tea and the forks with the fruitcake. And sure enough one of the antique sterling silver teaspoons was missing.

Ella the new maid hadn't noticed it; I would have to get it back. It would be easy enough; being a ghost I can take a few liberties.

Miss Polly was having a Sunday afternoon "at home" to introduce her betrothed, Mr. James Howell. There were four couples in the front parlor sipping tea and offering congratulations. One of the guests had helped himself to a memento of the occasion.

Of course I could take it out of his pocket and wave it in front of his nose or drop it on the floor. But this was a happy occasion; I didn't want to embarrass Miss Polly or her guests. She was so cheerful these days now that she had accepted Mister Jim's proposal. She had been a recluse since her brother had been killed overseas and the burden of managing the farm had fallen on her shoulders.

The man with a napkin on his knee and our spoon in his pocket was just a business ac-

quaintance from town. He began squirming in his chair. His wife frowned at him, but he kept shifting around and tugging at his collar.

I knew why. In his pocket the spoon was growing hotter by the minute. Finally he used his napkin to snatch it out of his pocket and drop it on a table nearby. He looked around guiltily, but nobody had noticed. Just to be sure I counted the silver again. I always take pride in my work.

Finally the guests left, showering Miss Polly and Mister Jim with best wishes. They were a handsome couple; slender, blonde Miss Polly who everybody thought would turn out to be a spinster, and Mister Jim, the tall stranger from Maryland who had bought the Simpson place down the road. They stood at the door until the last guest had disappeared down the curving driveway under the trees. Then Mister Jim took Miss Polly in his arms and kissed her.

"Is this the last of these affairs, I hope?" he asked.

"Just one more next Sunday." She smiled up at him. "You don't mind too much, do you, dear? I enjoy showing you off."

He gave her a squeeze. "All right. Just one more." There

was another kiss. "I've got to go and see to the stock."

He went off down the hall, and Miss Polly headed for the kitchen to see about supper. When we got there, I opened the door for her. Old habits are hard to break.

"Jonathan!" she hissed. "Someone might see you!"

She was right, of course. Anyone would be frightened to see the door opening all by itself. Or to see lamps light or fires start or hats hang themselves up. I try to be careful, but over the years I've made a few mistakes. Actually, there's not enough money in the state of Virginia to get Martha the cook to stay on the place after sundown.

Miss Polly and I have an understanding. She knows I am a ghost and I belong here at the Hall. She has made it plain that I am not to annoy anyone, except if there's a burglar. And I am definitely not to forget myself in front of the servants. Good help is hard to find.

From the kitchen I followed Miss Polly into the family parlor. She walked straight over to the fireplace and stood there, tapping her foot on the hearth. She looked at the two candlesticks on the mantel. I knew she wanted to talk to me.

"Jonathan, are you here? Answer me."

The candlestick on the right tilted a bit, then settled back. That meant I said yes. Moving the left candlestick meant no. Both candlesticks leaning toward each other meant maybe. Both leaning away meant I don't know.

Miss Polly's mother and I had worked out this system many years ago. It has its limits, but in my day house servants were not expected to read or write.

"Jonathan," Miss Polly said in her no-nonsense-now tone of voice, "you know I want to have a dowry. It's a family tradition."

The right candlestick said yes. I knew that; she and Mister Jim had been arguing about it for days. Miss Polly also wanted a traditional Pollard family wedding. It had to be in the rose garden with lots of relatives. And it would be expensive. Mister Jim thought a dowry was old fashioned and silly.

"You know I want to sell the Sargent and . . ."

The left candlestick jumped up in the air. "No!" The Sargent would certainly be a family heirloom, and I didn't like the notion of selling it.

Miss Polly stamped her foot. "It's a valuable painting, and I want the money for the wedding!" She was stubborn, like

her mother. The left candlestick sat down and was still.

Miss Polly took another approach. "You know my mother would have wanted me to have a dowry," she said in a wheedling tone. She had me there; her mother had been a stickler for tradition. Money was scarce, and would be until the crops were in this fall. And the Pollards didn't borrow, that was another tradition.

"Now listen, Jonathan," Miss Polly said. "I have asked a Mr. Madison from Roanoke to come down here and appraise the Sargent. He will be here tomorrow morning. I don't want to have any interference from you while he's in the house."

The candlesticks were quiet.

"You hear me, Jonathan?"

The right candlestick gave a little twitch, just enough to say yes.

"No tricks," she said sternly. "Promise?"

The right candlestick promised.

Mr. Madison from Roanoke arrived in one of those new automobiles called a runabout. It sat in the driveway with its bright enamel trim and the varnished wooden spokes gleaming and sparkling in the sunlight. All the hands from the barn came out to look at it.

Mr. Madison was overweight and prosperous looking. He

wore a brand new suit with a silk scarf for a tie. He even had spats on his shoes. I didn't open the door for him or take his hat.

Miss Polly let him in, and he bowed over her hand. Mister Jim shook hands briefly and headed for the barn. Miss Polly showed him into the front room, and he went straight to where the painting hung over a marble-topped buffet. He studied it carefully from both sides and asked for another lamp for more light. He even stood on a footstool to inspect the signature with a magnifying glass.

At last he came over and seated himself by Miss Polly and looked at her sorrowfully. "I am distressed to have to tell you this, my dear," he said, taking her hand, "but this is not a genuine Sargent."

Miss Polly drew back, astonished. "I've seen this happen in the best of families," he went on in a tone any undertaker would be proud of. "A real tragedy. Someone palms off a copy on an unsuspecting person." He patted her hand consolingly.

"But it is an excellent rendition, a very good copy. Worth a few hundred dollars perhaps, but not as much as you might have hoped."

Miss Polly said nothing; she was staring at the floor. Mr. Madison cleared his throat.

"Now, my dear, ah, if there is some family emergency, some need for ready cash, I will offer you, say, four hundred for the painting." He patted her hand again. "Here, I will leave you my card; just let me know when I may have it picked up."

He stood up and bowed. "I can find my way out, my dear." He was wearing a smug, self-satisfied smile as he opened the front door and went out. I had been tempted to fill his hat with syrup from the pantry, but I didn't. He was still in our house, and a promise is a promise.

It was time to break the rules. Miss Polly was bitterly disappointed, and I could do something about it. But I needed Mister Jim's help.

My conversations with Miss Polly, and with her mother, had always been strictly private. There had never been anyone else in the parlor when the candlesticks were talking. But now Mister Jim would have to be included.

He knew what I was and who I had been. And he had seen me make a mistake one time and refill his and Miss Polly's teacups. When he saw the teapot float across the room and back again, he turned a bit pale, but he didn't jump or cry out.

Of course Miss Polly had explained and asked him not to

say anything. But Mister Jim was still standoffish. For one thing, I was not his servant. And his dog, a nice red setter, refused to come in the house. Dogs and cats are that way about ghosts.

I went out and found Mister Jim and brought him in the house by letting him hear Miss Polly crying. Now they were sitting in the parlor, and he had his arms around her.

"Darn it! I had my heart set on a big family wedding," she sobbed, "and now we can't afford to have one."

"Look, honey, if it means that much to you, I'll sell Rose."

Rose was his prize-winning mare. Miss Polly stared at him. "Oh no, I couldn't let you do that . . ."

I thumped the right candlestick on the mantel to get their attention. Miss Polly's head was buried on Mister Jim's shoulder. "Oh, Jonathan," she murmured, "not now."

The candlestick thumped again and leaned over and pointed directly at Mister Jim. He couldn't help but see it.

Very politely he asked, "Have you something to say to us, Jonathan?"

"Yes."

"Is it about the wedding?"

"Yes."

"Is it about money?"

"Yes."

"Is it about selling the painting?"

"Yes."

Miss Polly frowned. "Now, Jonathan . . ." Behind them the hall door opened, and they turned to see Mr. Madison's card come sailing into the room. It circled around them and landed on the table. Then from a high shelf in the bookcase a small box came gliding toward them. Miss Polly had been learning the new card game of auction bridge; the box seemed to open itself, and a deck of playing cards spilled on the table.

One card jumped out of the pile and flew around the table; it was the jack of clubs. It made a little bow to Miss Polly, then to Mister Jim, then it hovered in the air between them, bobbing up and down like a cork on a fishing line.

Mister Jim stared at the card, frowning. "Jack of clubs," he said slowly. "The jack. The jack used to be called the knave."

The card bobbed faster and faster. Mister Jim's eyes brightened. "Knave. Scoundrel. Rogue."

He stared at Miss Polly. Her eyes widened, and she caught her breath. "Rogue," she repeated. "Villain. Fraud. Cheater!"

"Cheater!" The card flew up to the ceiling and dropped back to lie beside the business card on the table. Miss Polly and Mister Jim both turned and looked at the mantelpiece. "Is that it, Jonathan? Mr. Madison would have cheated us?"

The right candlestick did a cartwheel. They hugged each other. Then Miss Polly had a question.

"But how did you know, Jonathan? Have you ever seen Mr. Madison before?"

"No," admitted the left candlestick.

"Then how . . ."

"I've got it," Mister Jim said. "Jonathan knows the painting is authentic, and not a forgery. So he knows Madison was lying. Right, Jonathan?"

The right candlestick was bouncing. "Yes."

"Was there ever a bill of sale?" asked Miss Polly. Always practical, like her mother.

There wasn't any bill of sale. Uncle Jason Pollard had taken the painting in settlement of a gambling debt from a man who was a better art collector than poker player. Reluctantly the left candlestick said no.

That was enough about the devious Mr. Madison. In a day or so he would be just an unpleasant memory. Now there

was a much more important subject at hand.

Miss Polly's eyes began to fill with tears again. Mister Jim took her by the shoulders and shook her gently. "Forget about the money, sweetheart. Let's get married now." I knew she was thinking about the family custom of a big wedding.

I respect tradition as much as any person, or as any nonperson, but not when it can make two young people miserable. I think Miss Polly's mother would forgive me for what I did next. After all, I am a member of the family, almost.

In a desk on the other side of the room a drawer opened, and a big leatherbound book floated across the room to the table.

Miss Polly stared at the book in amazement. "Look, dear, it's our family Bible. What on earth..."

They watched as the cover opened and the pages began to turn through the records of births and marriages and deaths of the Pollard family. Then the pages stopped, and a tulip from a vase of cut flowers nearby came and hovered over a page. Miss Polly and Mister Jim moved closer to see. The tulip pointed at an entry in faded but precise handwriting:

*Abigail Cox Pollard and  
Robert Trent Belrose*

*eloped and were married  
in Richmond May 4, 1877.*

Mister Jim got my message right away. "There's your old tradition, honey! If some of your ancestors could elope, we can, too. Come on, forget the money. Let's get married now!"

The tears had vanished, and Miss Polly's eyes were shining like lanterns. "Yes, oh yes, dear..."

There was some lengthy kissing. I picked up the cards and dusted the furniture. At last Mister Jim jumped up and pulled her to her feet.

"Come on," he said, "let's leave now. We can be married in the county seat this afternoon."

She laughed. "I can be ready in thirty minutes."

"I'll give you fifteen. Now, scoot! I'll change and get the buggy."

She dashed from the room and flew upstairs. Mister Jim started for the door but turned and came back. He raised his hand in a little wave and looked at the mantelpiece. "Thanks, Jonathan."

That should have been the end of it, but there was a small delay. Mister Jim started down the hall but stopped when a knock came at the front door. He knew Martha in the kitchen

wouldn't hear it, so he swung open the big door.

Mr. Madison stood there. He was sweating and covered with dust. He had lost his hat, and his clothes were disheveled.

"Please," he said, panting. "I need help. After I left here this morning, a fog came up; it was so heavy I couldn't see. I ran off the road, and my new car is all smashed up."

He stopped for breath. "I've been walking for an hour, and I'm exhausted. Do you have a team that can pull my car out of the ditch and maybe tow me into town, please, sir?"

Mister Jim took his time about answering. An hour ago this city man had been willing and ready to cheat him out of some money, and now he stood there miserable and begging

for help. But farm folk tend to be compassionate and forgiving, and Mister Jim was no exception. And this was to be his wedding day.

"Yes, we can help you," he said. Mr. Madison almost collapsed with gratitude. "Wait right there a minute," Mister Jim told him.

He closed the door and looked down the empty hall. A wide grin spread across his face. "Now how in the world could a fog come up on a pretty day like this?" he said to himself. "And put that poor man and his car in a ditch? How in the world could that happen?"

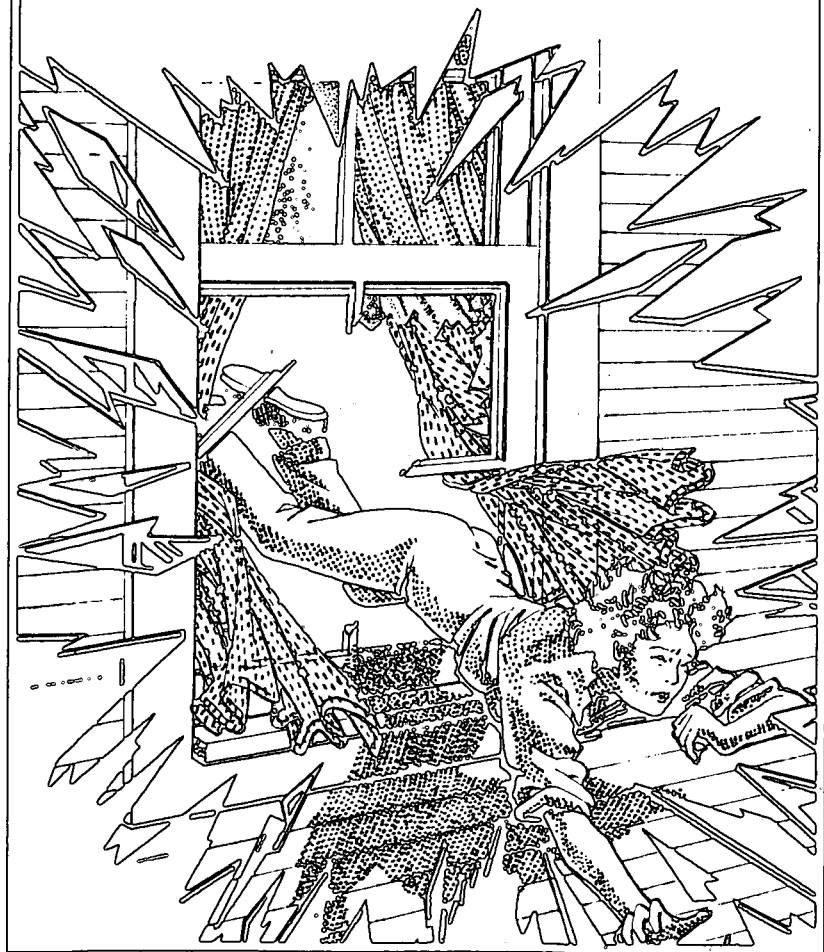
He grinned and shook his head and opened the door and went out. I knew how it happened, and I think he knew, too.



FICTION

# Shattered Crystal

by Carol Davis Luce



*Illustration by Sallie Gregory*

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A gunshot shattered the quiet. The report made me flinch despite the fact that I'm a cop accustomed to such sounds and that I knew what was coming. I glanced at the clock on the stove. Eighteen after.

Sitting at my kitchen table cluttered with breakfast remnants of cereal, Pop-tarts, spilled milk, and the uneaten crusts of warmed-over pizza, I closed my eyes again and listened to the ensuing silence, absently crushing cornflakes beneath my fingertips. A second gunshot exploded. I looked at the clock. Six minutes had passed. Exactly two and one half minutes later the cassette clicked off.

An image of Trudy Moore flickered across my mind. Trudy in the beginning and Trudy near the end. Over the years in my police work I had tried hard to stay uninvolved personally, but sometimes it just couldn't be helped. This case had been one of those fraught with disappointment and frustration, impeded by the very system meant to remedy it.

It began for me on a blustery day in November in the cramped detective division of the Spring Valley Police Department where I serve as the department's first and only female detective.

"Detective Winick?"

I looked up from the bottom drawer of my desk where I had just stashed an assortment of commandeered Halloween candy that my seven-year-old nephew Billy had collected trick-or-treating the night before. I recognized the woman standing at my desk. It wasn't the first time she'd been in this department. In fact, I'd seen her at least three times in the past working with two other detectives—first with Sal, then Chester.

But that had been months ago. The change in the woman was shocking. I recalled a rather plain but robust-looking young woman with a straight, confident posture wearing a tidy waitress uniform.

She didn't look so robust now. With dark smudges under her eyes, lipstick chewed away from dry lips, and the shine gone from hair that was limp and beginning to show gray, she slouched with what I could only describe as obvious despair. Her uniform had lost its starch and fit a little looser. There was no doubt about it, this woman's appearance had gradually gone downhill with each visit to the station.

"I'm Trudy Moore. Detective Bernstein said you were probably the one who could best help me."

"Oh yeah. Why is that?"

She shrugged. "Maybe 'cause you're a woman."

That sent red lights flashing in my head. "Have a seat, Mrs. Moore." I let go of the candy and reluctantly closed the drawer.

She sank into a chair. Behind her at the double glass doors I saw Sal and Chester approaching, laughing and talking, about to enter when Chester glanced our way and then pulled on Sal's arm. Sal looked, his smile instantly changing to a grimace as they both executed a quick about-face and retreated.

So that was it. Mrs. Moore was a passalong. First Sal, then Chester, and now me. She was no doubt the station kook. What was it? Voices in her head? Little people on her heels? The neighbor's barking dog?

With head bowed, fingers picking at something that looked like spaghetti sauce on her uniform, she said, "He's beginning to really scare me."

"Who?"

"It's all on report. I told Detectives Parker and Bernstein all about it. They took reports."

"Why don't we just start fresh. From the beginning, okay?"

She nodded, sighed with resignation. "I know there's no anti-stalker law in this state, but I—"

"We're working on it."

"Isn't there something you people can do anyway?"

"Why don't you tell me about it. First," I said, readying my notepad, "give me a little background on you, if you will."

She nodded again, swallowed, and began.

She was thirty-one, divorced three years, and had a daughter, five. She worked as a waitress in a coffee shop in the mall, but she was going to quit because of *him*. Before the waitress job she was a teller at a bank, a ticket seller at the Cinema 8, and a clerk at the Stop n' Go, all jobs she'd had to quit because of this *weirdo*.

"Pestering you, huh?"

"Without letup. Since April Fool's Day."

"Go on."

"I get a new job and he finds out where and suddenly there he is, hanging around and grinning that creepy grin."

"He an old boyfriend of yours?"

"Absolutely not!" She told me that this man turned up one day at the convenience store where she worked, the one under the

overpass, and pretty soon he was there every day, hanging around, drinking coffee and watching.

"Watching?"

"Me. Watching me."

"Go on."

Intimidated by this, Trudy quit and went to work for the movie theater. She felt a measure of safety inside the ticket booth, but when he started showing up there, she left and went on to the bank. At least they had a security guard. But after only two weeks she was fired because she made too many mistakes, so unnerved by his vigil on the bus bench across the street—the bus would come and go and still he sat there staring at her through the tinted glass of the bank's drive-up window. Her latest job at the cafe had brought him inside again. He'd come full circle. He was back to sipping coffee and watching her, except now he was calling her at home on her unlisted number.

"What's he say?"

"Nothing." She twisted her fingers. "If he don't quit calling and saying nothing, I'm gonna go crazy."

I took a report like my two colleagues before me and suggested she get a new unlisted phone number. Other than that, I said, our hands were tied. She worked in a public place. It was a free country, and the man had a right to a cup of coffee if he'd paid for it. Where he looked was his own business as long as he wasn't peeping in her window and as long as he kept his hands to himself. All things she'd heard before and didn't want to hear again.

I knew what she was going through. My sister had gone through the same crap. The calls, the letters, the looming shadow. But instead of a stranger stalking Lilly, it had been her ex-husband. Lilly had gone through all the right channels. The police, the courts. Nothing helped. Least of all the restraining order that failed to keep her ex from ambushing her one night after work and shooting her five times in the head before putting the gun to his own head. Lilly's two boys, Billy and Chuck, now live with me.

Two weeks later Trudy sank down into the chair by my desk and said, "He knows where I live."

"Whatshisname? The watcher?" I asked, though not the least bit surprised. He probably knew exactly when she ate, slept, even when she took her daily vitamins.

"He's hanging around our house. I got a little girl, she's just a baby, five. Detective Winick, you've got to do something. Arrest him."

"Has he done anything illegal?"

"I'm not sure. Like what?"

"Like prowling around your house. Going through your mail. Vandalizing personal property. Laying hands on you . . . laying hands on your little girl."

She visibly blanched at the latter. "He's harassing me. He calls or shows up all hours of the day and night. Isn't there some law that says people got a right to peace and quiet, privacy, and the pursuit of happiness?"

"He has the same rights, Mrs. Moore. And unless he's actually doing something that's against the law, you know as well as I do that I can't do a darn thing."

"What's gotta happen before you can step in, huh? He gonna have to break into our house and hurt me, hurt my little girl? Kill us?"

I repressed a shudder. Bile rose to my throat as I remembered looking upon Lilly's nearly unrecognizable face at the morgue when asked to identify her body. "He threaten to do those things?"

"What he does is calls and tells me he loves me, can't live without me and hopes to spend *eternity* with me. What's that sound like to you?"

It sounded like he wasn't going to give up, but I didn't say as much to her. I knew that even in states where anti-stalker laws existed, little could be done to stop these guys. Behavior such as theirs was not normal, and they went to great lengths and risks to pursue their victims.

Before I could answer, she stood, dug into the wide pocket of her uniform, brought out a dozen photographs, and tossed them onto my desk.

I fanned them out. Though the background view was different in each one, the man was the same. A scrawny little guy with greasy dark hair and tiny eyes like blackened steelies, dressed in army fatigues. He stared directly into the camera, grinning, obviously aware he was being photographed.

"Nam vet?" I inquired.

"I didn't ask. But when I turn up missing or dead one day, you'll know what my killer looks like." She pivoted sharply and marched off.

That night I drove to the quiet neighborhood where Trudy Moore lived. Her house, a little bungalow of Spanish design surrounded by a jungle of shrubs and trees, was a prowler's paradise. The

weather was mild and balmy, yet all around the small bungalow the doors and mini-blinds were shut tight. No toys in the yard, no sign of a child anywhere.

And then I saw why.

Parked at the curb was a beat-up Jeep Wrangler. A man in camouflage fatigues sat slumped behind the wheel with black steelie eyes fixed on the house.

I parked behind him, got out of my car, adjusted the harness holster of my Colt .45 beneath my blazer, and moved toward the driver's door, taking out my shield as I approached.

I had to tap him on the shoulder to get his attention, so engrossed was he in his vigil. Flashing my shield, I said, "What do you think you're doing?"

The man looked me up and down. "Minding my own business."

"You live there?" I jutted my chin at the Moore house.

"No, but a friend of mine does."

"Lemme see your license and registration."

The man sighed, shifted around, and got his wallet from a deep pocket in the fatigues. He handed over the driver's license, then went for the registration papers.

Martin Cole, age forty-two, it read. "Look, Martin, I don't think the lady wants to be your friend. I think she wants you to leave her alone. Know what else I think? I think you'd better knock off this crap 'cause you're getting on the lady's nerves."

"Have I broken the law?"

"Maybe."

"Arrest me then."

I wished to hell I could. I hated garbage like him. Garbage who knew the law and teetered on the edge of it. Garbage who knew exactly how far he could go. Garbage who pecked away at the system, never quite breaking through the layered skin of legality. Garbage who had the power to disrupt lives and create chaos.

"Get out of here, mister. Now." I returned his papers. "And don't come back."

The man stared blandly at me. I felt the muscles bunching at the back of my neck. Was Martin Cole going to force me to take action? Without a court order Cole was legally within his rights to sit in his vehicle on a public street. I could haul him in on some trumped up charge, risking a false arrest complaint, or I could back off and walk away, giving this maggot the satisfaction of besting me.

Something in me snapped. I saw my sister's ex-husband sitting there, smirking at me. Saw the man who'd made my two nephews motherless. My hand moved toward my police revolver. Maybe he sensed my rage or maybe he was just tired of the game; he started the engine and, with one last look at the house, drove off.

I knocked at the door. I saw the blinds split, fingertips and an eye. A moment later a visibly shaken Trudy Moore invited me in.

A little blonde girl, the same age as my younger nephew, sat on the floor watching cartoons on a large screen TV. "Karen honey, turn off the TV and go play in your room while I talk to the nice policewoman, okay?"

"He do that every day?" I asked when the girl left the room. "Sit out there?"

"Most every day, yeah."

"Well, I had a talk with him. I don't think he'll be bothering you any more."

Her response was a short, sharp laugh. "See that?" she said, pointing to an entertainment system covering one entire wall. "I just bought it. Might as well have the best, it's all Karen and I get to do any more. If we try to take in a movie or get an ice cream, he's right there. She can't play outside, and I just work and come straight home. He's got us prisoners in our own home." Then she broke down and cried.

I spent the following week at home sick with the latest flu bug and two rowdy boys. On my first day back at the station, still feeling rotten, Trudy dropped in. She looked a zillion times worse than I felt.

What little defiance she'd exhibited on her last visit was gone. She crossed the room as if each step were an effort and collapsed into the chair, wringing thin fingers with nails bitten down to the quick.

I reached out and gently squeezed her thin arm. "Trudy?"

"He's making threats. Now can you arrest him?"

"What kind of threats?"

"I can't live without you. My life is meaningless.' Garbage like that. He had a representative from a funeral home contact me asking for confirmation on a joint plot at the cemetery. And last night he called and said we had to do it."

"Do what?"

"End it. Double suicide. It's the only way, Trudy,' that's what he said."

I had run a check on him. No priors. He was single, lived with his bingo-playing mother in a trailer park west of town.

"He's been bugging me for eight months now. He gets bolder each passin' day. Karen's scared to death. She wakes up screaming with night terrors. Any more, her time is split between watching him out the window and watching TV. She can't go outside like a normal kid unless I take her to my mom's. And it's probably only a matter of time before he starts hanging around there."

"Have you considered moving?" I asked quietly.

She couldn't move, she told me. Her husband had child visitation rights, and he'd raise a stink. If she made too much of it, he'd try again to get custody of Karen. Besides, she was brought up here, all her friends and family were here. She had a house and financial obligations.

"It isn't fair he should be able to chase me off." She scratched at the back of her hands, which were raw and chafed. "Anyway, he'd probably follow me like he did the last time."

"Last time?"

"Karen and I went three hundred miles last weekend to visit my grandmother. I watched him drive by her house."

"You correspond with your grandmother?"

"Yeah, sure."

I figured Cole had gone through her garbage and found the discarded letters. I told her to be careful what she tossed in the trash. "Mrs. Moore, do you own a gun?"

I went to see Cole's mother. I caught her between bingo games. She invited me into her mobile home, listened patiently, then shrugged helplessly and said Martin was a grown man and, though he had his problems, he stayed out of trouble.

"Problems?" I asked.

"Well, he don't like to work. And he has this fascination with war stuff and firearms. I don't care for all those firearms under my roof."

"Your son served in Vietnam?"

"No. He was in the service, but they let him out on a medical discharge."

"May I see his firearms?"

She took me to a room in the back, Cole's bedroom. A virtual arsenal. Firearms in a wide range of makes and models. Handguns, rifles, shotguns, and the ammo to go with them, all legal and



proper. No Uzis or MP's. Cole was simply exercising his right to bear arms.

Tacked to the walls and scattered among black and white pictures of war scenes were candid shots of Trudy Moore. Trudy getting into her car. Trudy getting the mail. Trudy and her daughter at a school playground. Trudy wasn't the only one snapping pictures, it seemed.

"Who's this?" I pointed to her photograph.

"Oh, that's Marty's girlfriend. He's been seeing her for a long time. First time I saw her picture I thought how much she looks like a teacher Marty had in eighth grade. He had the wildest crush on that teacher. He was so googlie-eyed over her he couldn't concentrate in class. Sad part was she flunked him, got married, and left town. He was real despondent over that." She paused, turned to the pictures, and asked, "Is she the one he's been pestering?"

Soon after that Cole began to get careless. He stepped up his crusade, calling day and night and even approaching Trudy on the street and at her home. Once he brandished a revolver, but Trudy was the only witness so it was her word against his. She tried to hide out; still he found her in record time. Pushed to the limit, Trudy's brother dragged Cole from the Jeep and pounded him good. Cole pressed charges for assault and battery and got the brother thrown in jail overnight. The threats increased. The situation grew more volatile, and the fuse got shorter. Although Cole was losing a measure of control, he still managed to stay within the boundaries of the law.

Trudy Moore lost her job and her health and became a psychological wreck. Her ex-husband went to court to gain custody of Karen, stating that his ex was emotionally unable to care for their daughter. He was granted temporary custody.

Through all this I shared the poor woman's anger, frustration, and sense of helplessness. I lay awake at night trying to figure out ways to stop him. Short of blowing him away myself, I saw no solution.

And then it happened.

It was near noon on a mild winter day when I pulled up to the Moore house to find a half dozen police cars, lights flashing, and officers with guns drawn taking positions around the house. Martin Cole's Jeep was parked in the driveway. *Bold little bastard*, I thought.

I spotted the sergeant and hurried to him.

"This one's yours, isn't it?" Sergeant Lopez said.

"Yes. Fill me in."

"At eleven twenty-eight we got the 10-57; the neighbor on the left heard the first shot. A few minutes later comes the 10-67. It was a 911, a woman, at this address, calling for help. Dispatch hears a shot and hears her screaming, *'He's gonna kill me!'* Then the line goes dead. That was ten minutes ago. Nothing more since."

"Anyone see anything inside?"

"Blinds shut tight all around."

"Contact by phone?"

"Dead."

"Damn." Poor Trudy. An innocent victim who had the bad luck to look like some nut's eighth grade teacher. Cole had ruined her life. Up to this point the law was on his side, and he'd taken full advantage of it. Lot of good that did her now. I could only pray that Mrs. Moore was still alive and that she'd make it out of this in one piece, both physically and mentally unimpaired.

"She's got a kid, doesn't she?"

"Husband's got custody," I said.

The bullhorn barked. Sergeant Lopez was saying, "C'mon, Cole, let the lady go. You don't want to hurt her. Just open the front door and come out real slow with your hands up."

Suddenly there was a commotion inside the house. A scream, then a chair came crashing through the window, spraying glass everywhere, and through a clattering of miniblinds a body vaulted onto the front porch. A shot rang out inside the house. The woman rolled off the porch and into a patch of iceplant. Within seconds several uniforms were there, giving Trudy Moore cover and hustling her to safety.

She was bleeding in a dozen places from the shards of glass, but otherwise she seemed unharmed. Cole had shot at her but missed. She and I sat in the back of an emergency vehicle while a paramedic tended her wounds.

"How much artillery does he have?" I asked.

"Just the . . . the one gun. A handgun."

"Ammo?"

She shook her head and shrugged, then went into a fit of shakes.

I heard Lopez give the directive to fire tear gas through the front window.

From inside the house another shot rang out, and Trudy screamed.

"We're going to rush the house," the sarge said to me moments later. "It's possible he's down. One of the sharpshooters, scoping through a crack in the blinds, says he can see someone lying on the living room floor. No movement."

It was all over in less than a minute. The police rushed the house, found Martin Cole down with a bullet to the head, a revolver at his side. The coroner pronounced him dead at the scene. He was taken to the morgue. Trudy Moore was treated at Valley Hospital and released.

It had been a long, trying ordeal for Trudy, an act comparable to terrorism, but at last it was over.

I brushed the cornflakes crumbs aside and lifted my nephew's cassette player from the table. I removed the cassette and turned it over in my hands. A good brand. Top of the line. Pitch so true the right notes could shatter crystal.

An hour later I knocked on Trudy Moore's door. I was surprised by the change in her. In just two weeks she was less gaunt and had regained some color. Her darting, frightened eyes now mirrored a gentle softness. She invited me in. I saw suitcases in the entry.

"Going on a trip?"

She nodded. "Karen and I. We want to celebrate our freedom—freedom from *him*—by taking a little vacation to Mexico."

"You got custody of Karen again?"

"Oh yes." Her eyes shone with exhilaration. "I'm picking her up at her father's on the way to the airport."

In the door frame to her right I saw a bullet hole. The day of the shooting I had watched SCI dig that slug out. I put my finger to the hole.

"Four bullets were fired from Cole's gun," I said. "One was found here in the door frame and one in Cole's head. There's no trace of the other two."

"Does it matter one way or another?" she asked, her gaze unflinching.

"Maybe. Maybe not. It's just that I'm one of those people who likes to have everything sorted out, if possible. Got a minute?"

She nodded, led the way into the kitchen. Without asking, she poured two cups of coffee.

We sat, silently staring at each other. Finally, in a soft voice she said, "You have reservations about that man's death?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. The way I see it he didn't pull that trigger."

She stiffened. "You think I did? I wasn't anywhere near him when he died. You know that."

"I know I was with you when we heard the final, and presumably, fatal shot. Now that's where those reservations come in."

"The medical examiner found something?"

"Oh no, everything points to suicide. Couldn't be neater. The autopsy report states the victim's death occurred well within the time restraints. Gunpowder residue on his hand. Four shots were heard, and there were four empty shell casings in the chamber of the weapon. The weapon was registered to the victim. Everyone knew the man had been harassing you for months, documented by myself and a number of police dispatches. Everyone also knew there was no way you or your family could stop him unless he broke into your house and tried to assault you. No, everything falls into place . . . except for one thing."

I reached into my purse and brought out the cassette. The color drained from Trudy Moore's already pale face.

"Four reported gunshots and only two recovered slugs."

"The missing bullets could be buried in the carpeting or the furniture. The police didn't really search very hard. If you'd like to look for yourself—"

I shook my head. "It'd be a waste of time. Because I know where they are." I tapped the cassette. "They're right here on this tape. The tape I took from your cassette player the afternoon of the shootout."

She leaned back. She looked very tired, emotionally drained. "Why don't you tell me what you think happened."

I slowly turned the cassette over in my fingers. "You knew he had a large gun collection, and you knew where he lived. I think you managed to get inside his place and steal a gun. You figured it would take at least four shots to make your plan work—what'd you do, shoot off a couple rounds in the woods ahead of time? And how'd you get him to come inside?" When she only stared at me, I shrugged and went on. "However it happened, you got him inside and then you shot him at very close range. You wait a few minutes, call 911, scream out, *'He's going to kill me'* as you wrap his fingers around the gun and fire. The second gunshot is heard. That's the slug that enters the door frame. All the while you had the tape

running and now there are two gun reports recorded on a cassette all ready to play back on that rather fine stereo with the Dolby sound."

She scratched at the back of her hand and continued to stare at me, calmly, coolly, as though I were merely relating the plot of a movie I'd seen.

"Let's see if I got this right," I said. "Cole is dead on the floor. The cops have surrounded the place. You start the tape, break the window and jump out at the exact moment the first shot on the tape is heard. Then several minutes later—six to be precise—while paramedics tend to your wounds, the final shot is heard. The house is surrounded. Cole was the only person left in the house so it had to be him who fired the last shot." I offered a thin smile. "I'm sitting with you in the ambulance and half the neighborhood, we're all right there. You got yourself one helluva alibi.

"Luck was with you. A few more seconds and tear gas would have been used, which, nasty stuff that it is, would have showed up during the postmortem exam. Tear gas residue on Cole and his clothes but, oddly enough, not in his air passages or lungs, since he was already dead. Yeah, luck was *finally* with you, Trudy."

She was crying now. Softly. "He wasn't ever going to leave me alone. Ever," she spoke quietly. "He called and I told him I was ready . . . ready to die. Told him he'd ruined my life so there was nothing for me to live for. He came right over. I could see by the craziness in his eyes that he wanted it to happen. He could hardly wait. It was no game, not to him. He was smiling that . . . that creepy smile of his. The gun—"

"Well, it's over, Trudy," I said, cutting her off. I squeezed her hand, stood. "It's all over."

I placed the cassette in her hands and closed her fingers around it. "Give Karen a hug for me. Have a good trip. Have a good life."

I turned and walked out.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# Nearly Perfect

by A. A. Milne

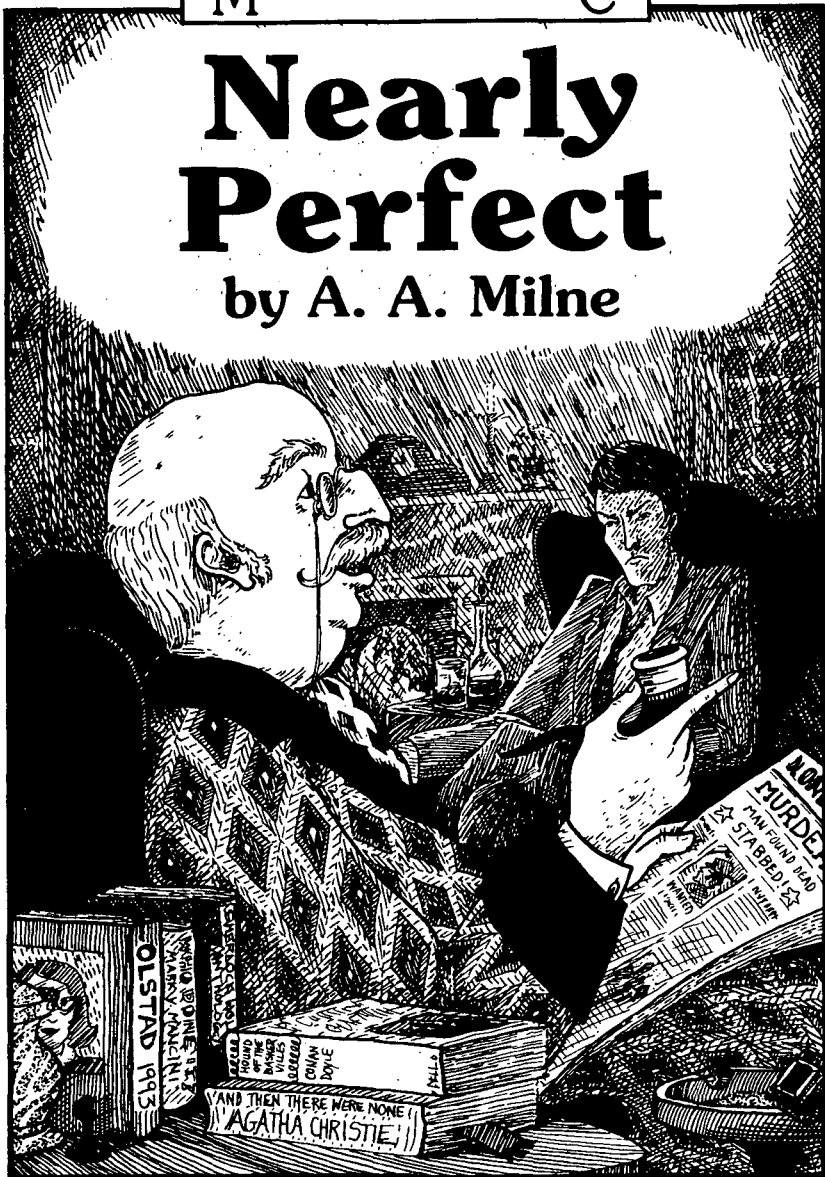


Illustration by Patricia Olstad

“**K**indness doesn’t always pay,” said Coleby, “and I can tell you a very sad story that proves it.”  
“Kindness is its own reward,” I said. I knew that somebody else would say it if I didn’t.

“The reward in this case was the hangman’s rope. Which is what I was saying.”

“Is it a murder story?”

“Very much so.”

“Good.”

“What was the name of the kind gentleman?” asked Sylvia.

“Julian Crayne.”

“And he was hanged?”

“Very unfairly, or so he thought. And if you will listen to the story instead of asking silly questions, you can say whether you agree with him.”

“How old was he?”

“About thirty.”

“Goodlooking?”

“Not after he was hanged. Do you want to hear this story, or don’t you?”

“Yes!” said everybody.

So Coleby told us the story.

Julian Crayne (he said) was an unpleasantly smooth young man who lived in the country with his Uncle Marius. He should have been working, but he disliked work. He disliked the country, too, but a suggestion that Julian should help the export drive in London—with the aid of a handsome allowance from Marius—met with an unenthusiastic response even when Julian threw in an offer to come down regularly for weekends and bring some of his friends with him. Marius didn’t particularly like his nephew, but he liked having him about. Rich, elderly bachelors often become bores, and bores prefer to have somebody at hand who cannot escape. Marius did not intend to let Julian escape. To have nobody to talk to through the week, and then to have a household of rowdy young people at the weekend, none of whom wanted to listen to him, was not his idea of pleasure. He had the power over his nephew that money gives, and he preferred to use it.

“It will all come to you when I die, my boy,” he said, “and until then you won’t grudge a sick old man the pleasure of your company.”

"Of course not," said Julian. "It was only that I was afraid you were getting tired of me."

If Marius had really been a sick old man, any loving nephew such as Julian might have been content to wait. But Marius was a sound sixty-five, and in that very morning's newspaper there had been talk of somebody at Runcorn who had just celebrated his hundred and fifth birthday. Julian didn't know where Runcorn was, but he could add forty years to his own age, and ask himself what the devil would be the use of this money at seventy; whereas now, with a hundred and fifty thousand pounds in the bank, and all life to come—well, you can see for yourself how the thing would look to him.

I don't know if any of you have ever wondered about how to murder an uncle—an uncle whose heir and only relation you are. As we all know, the motives for murder are many. Revenge, passion, gain, fear, or simply the fact that you have seen the fellow's horrible face in the paper so often that you feel it to be almost a duty to eliminate it. The only person I have ever wanted to murder is—well, I won't mention names, because I may do it yet. But the point is that the police, in their stolid, unimaginative way, always look first for the money motive, and if the money motive is there, you are practically in the bag.

So you see the very difficult position in which Julian was placed. He lived alone with his uncle, he was his uncle's heir, and his uncle was a very rich man. However subtly he planned, the dead weight of that hundred and fifty thousand pounds was against him. Any other man might push Marius into the river, and confidently wait for a verdict of accidental death; but not Julian. Any other man might place a tablet of some untraceable poison in the soda-mint bottle, and look for a certificate of "Death from Natural Causes"; but not Julian. Any other man might tie a string across the top step of the attic stairs—but I need not go on. You see, as Julian saw, how terribly unfair it was. The thing really got into his mind. He used to lie awake night after night thinking how unfair it was, and how delightfully easy it would be if it weren't for that hundred and fifty thousand pounds.

The trouble was that he had nobody in whom to confide. He wished now, and for the first time, that he were married. With a loving wife to help him, how blithely they could have pursued, hand in hand, the search for the foolproof plan. What a stimulant to his brain would have been some gentle, fairhaired creature of



the intelligence of the average policeman, who would point out the flaws and voice the suspicions the plan might raise. In such a delicate matter as this, two heads were better than one, even if the other head did nothing but listen with its mouth slightly ajar. At least he would then have the plan out in the open and be able to take a more objective view of it.

Unfortunately, the only person available was his uncle.

What he had to find—alone, if so it must be—was an alternative suspect to himself; somebody, in the eyes of the police, with an equally good motive. But what other motive could there be for getting rid of such an estimable man as Marius Crayne? A bore, yes; but would the average inspector recognize boredom as a reasonable motive? Even if he did, it would merely be an additional motive for Julian. There was, of course, the possibility of “framing” somebody, a thing they were always doing in detective stories. But the only person in a position to be framed was old John Coppard, the gardener, and the number of footprints, fingerprints, blunt instruments, and bloodstained handkerchiefs with the initials J. C. on them that would be necessary to offset the absence of motive was more than Julian cared to contemplate.

I have said that Uncle Marius was a bore. Bores can be divided into two classes: those who have their own particular subject, and those who don't need a subject. Marius was in the former, and less offensive, class. Shortly before his retirement (he was in the tea business), he had brought off a remarkable double. He had filled in his first football pool form “just to see how it went,” distributing the numbers and the crosses in an impartial spirit, and had posted it “just for fun.” He followed this up by taking over a lottery ticket from a temporarily embarrassed but rather intimidating gentleman whom he had met on a train. The result being what it was, Marius was convinced that he had a flair—as he put it, “a nose for things.” So when he found that through the long winter evenings—and, indeed, during most of the day—there was nothing to do in the country but read detective stories, it soon became obvious to him that he had a nose for crime.

Well, it was this nose poor Julian had had to face. It was bad enough, whenever a real crime was being exploited in the papers, to listen to his uncle's assurance that once again Scotland Yard was at fault, as it was obviously the mother-in-law who had put the arsenic in the gooseberry tart; it was much more boring when the murder had taken place in the current detective story, and

Marius was following up a confused synopsis of the first half with his own analysis of the clues.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, this fellow—I forget his name for a moment—Carmichael, something like that—had met the girl, Doris—I mean Phyllis—had met Phyllis accidentally in Paris some years before—well, a year or two, the exact time doesn't matter—it was just that she and this fellow, what did I call him, Arbuthnot? . . ."

And it was at just such a moment as this that Julian was suddenly inspired.

"You know, Uncle Marius," he said, "you ought to write a detective story."

Marius laughed self-consciously, and said he didn't know about that.

"Of course you could! You're just the man. You've got a flair for that sort of thing, and you wouldn't make the silly mistakes all these other fellows make."

"Oh, I dare say I should be all right with the deduction and induction and so on—that's what I'm really interested in—but I've never thought of myself as a writer. There's a bit of a knack to it, you know. More in your line than mine, I should have thought."

"Uncle, you've said it!" cried Julian. "We'll write it together. Two heads are better than one. We can talk it over every evening and criticize each other's suggestions. What do you say?"

Marius was delighted with the idea. So, of course, was Julian. He had found his collaborator.

Give me a drink, somebody.

Yes, (went on Coleby, wiping his mouth), I know what you are expecting. Half of you are telling yourselves that, ironically enough, it was Uncle who thought of the foolproof plan for murder that Nephew put into execution; and the rest of you are thinking what much more fun it would be if Nephew thought of the plan, and, somewhat to his surprise, Uncle put it into execution. Actually, it didn't happen quite like that.

Marius, when it came to the point, had nothing much to contribute. But he knew what he liked. For him, one murder in a book was no longer enough. There must be two, the first one preferably at a country house party, with plenty of suspects. Then, at a moment when he is temporarily baffled, the inspector receives a letter inviting him to a secret rendezvous at midnight, where the writer will be waiting to give him important information. He arrives to

find a dying man, who is just able to gasp out "Horace" (or was it Hoxton?) before expiring in his arms. The murderer has struck again!

"You see the idea, my boy? It removes any doubt in the reader's mind that the first death was accidental, and provides the detective with a second set of clues. By collating the two sets—"

"You mean," asked Julian, "that it would be taken for granted that the murderer was the same in the two cases?"

"Well, of course, my dear boy, of course!" said Marius, surprised at the question. "What else? The poacher, or whoever it was, had witnessed the first murder but had foolishly given some hint of his knowledge to others—possibly in the bar of the local public house. Naturally the murderer has to eliminate him before the information can be passed on to the police."

"Naturally," said Julian thoughtfully. "Yes . . . Exactly . . . You know—" and he smiled at his uncle "—I think something might be done on those lines."

For there, he told himself happily, was a foolproof plan. First, commit a completely motiveless murder, of which he could not possibly be suspected. Then, which would be easy, encourage Uncle Marius to poke his "nose for things" into the case, convince him that he and he alone had found the solution, and persuade him to make an appointment with the local inspector. And then, just before the inspector arrives, "strike again." It was, as he was accustomed to say when passing as a Battle of Britain pilot in Piccadilly bars, a piece of cake.

It may seem to some of you that in taking on this second murder Julian was adding both to his difficulties and his moral responsibility. But you must remember that through all these months of doubt he had been obsessed by one thing only, the intolerable burden of motive, so that suddenly to be rid of it, and to be faced with a completely motiveless killing, gave him an exhilarating sense of freedom in which nothing could go wrong. He had long been feeling that such a murder would be easy. He was now persuaded that it would be blameless.

The victim practically selected himself, and artistically, Julian liked to think, was one of whom Uncle Marius would have approved. A mile or two away at Birch Hall lived an elderly gentleman by the name of Corphew. Not only was he surrounded by greedy relations of both sexes, but in his younger days he had lived a somewhat mysterious life in the East. It did not outrage

credibility to suppose that, as an innocent young man, he might have been mixed up in some Secret Society, or, as a more experienced one, might have robbed some temple of its most precious jewel. Though no dark men had been seen loitering in the neighborhood lately, it was common knowledge that Sir George had a great deal of money to leave and was continually altering or threatening to alter his will. In short, his situation fulfilled all the conditions Uncle Marius demanded of a good detective story.

At the moment Julian had no personal acquaintance with Sir George. Though, of course, they would have to be in some sort of touch with each other at the end, his first idea was to remain discreetly outside the family circle. Later reflection, however, told him that in this case he would qualify as one of those mysterious strangers who were occasionally an alternative object of suspicion for the police—quite effectively, because Julian was of a dark, even swarthy, complexion. It would be better, he felt, to be recognized as a friendly acquaintance; obviously harmless, obviously with nothing to gain, even something to lose, by Sir George's death.

In making this acquaintance with his victim, Julian was favored by fortune. Rejecting his usual method of approach to a stranger (an offer to sell him some shares in an oil well in British Columbia), he was presenting himself at the Hall as the special representative of a paper interested in Eastern affairs, when he heard a cry for help from a little coppice that bordered the drive. Sir George, it seemed, had tripped over a root and sprained his ankle. With the utmost good will, Julian carried him up to the house. When he left an hour later, it was with a promise to drop in on a bedridden Sir George the next day, and play a game of chess with him.

Julian was no great chess player, but he was sufficiently intimate with the pieces to allow Sir George the constant pleasure of beating him. Between games, he learned all he could of his host's habits and the family's members. There seemed to him to be several admirable candidates for chief suspect, particularly a younger brother of sinister aspect called Eustace, who had convinced himself that he was to be the principal legatee. Indeed, the possibility of framing Eustace did occur to him, but he remembered in time that a second framing for the murder of Marius would then be necessary, and might easily be impracticable. Let them sort it out. The more suspects the better.

Any morbid expectations you may now have of a detailed account of the murder of Sir George Corphew will not be satisfied. It is

enough to say that it involved the conventional blunt instrument, and took place at a time when at least some of the family would not be likely to have an alibi. Julian was not at this time an experienced murderer, and he would have been the first to admit that he had been a little careless about footprints, fingerprints, and cigarette ashes. But as he would never be associated with the murder, this did not matter.

All went as he had anticipated. A London solicitor had produced a will in which all the family was heavily involved, and the inspector had busied himself with their alibis, making it clear that he regarded each one with the liveliest suspicion. Moreover, Uncle Marius was delighted to pursue his own line of investigation, which, after hovering for a moment round the vicar, was now rapidly leading to a denunciation of an undergardener called Spratt.

"Don't put anything on paper," said Julian kindly. "It might be dangerous. Ring up the inspector, and ask him to come in and see you tonight. Then you can tell him all about it."

"That's a good idea, my boy," said Marius. "That's what I'll do."

But, as it happened, the inspector was already on his way. A local solicitor had turned up with a new will, made only a few days before. "In return for his kindness in playing chess with an old man," as he put it, Sir George had made Julian Crayne his sole legatee.

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## **SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY "UNSOLVED":**

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Chet Inge killed Frank Napier. As the game fatally ended, the players were seated clockwise around the table: Bill Hager, the chef from Toronto; George Jackson, the farmer from Reno; Don McDuff, the electrician from Quebec; Al Lang, the artist from Pittsburgh; Frank Napier, the grocer from Utica; Chet Inge, the barber from Omaha; and Ed Kilroy, the doctor from San Antonio.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**H**arold Adams won the Private Eye Writers of America's Shamus award for his last book, *The Man Who Was Taller Than God*. Carl Wilcox makes another welcome appearance in *A Perfectly Proper Murder* (Walker, \$18.95). Carl rolls into Podunkville, South Dakota (I kid you not), in his trusty old Model T, in search of a few sign-painting jobs before he moves on. When the town's wealthiest citizen is found dead, the evidence points to the stranger in town, so Carl is warned not to leave until there's an arrest. That's enough for Carl: someone has tried to set him up, and he is riled. Besides, he can't leave town anyway, right? This is an unusual series set in Depression-era small towns with a likeable, laconic hero. In the annals of P.I.'s, Carl Wilcox is unique, and spending time with him is a simple pleasure, just like a glass of lemonade on a porch swing on a hot day.

Nero Wolfe reluctantly consents to work for his orchid money in another of Robert Goldsborough's novels that continue the beloved series by the late Rex Stout. The case revolves around *The Missing Chapter* (Bantam, \$19.95), and it's great fun. A manic-depressive mystery writer has finally had some success continuing a popular series after its creator's death. Sure, some die-hard fans object to Charles Childress as a usurper. And certainly the man's arrogance has made him a few enemies—namely, his former editor and his former agent, both of whom he fired. But is that any reason for him to commit suicide? His publisher doesn't think so, and he hires Nero Wolfe and his trusty sidekick Archie to get to the truth. The backdrop of book publishing, and particularly of pastiches (which, of course, Goldsborough himself is “perpetrating”), puts a slight

satirical spin on the tale. The real treat is watching the incomparable Nero Wolfe work, and to have the entertaining Archie provide the commentary.

It's selling in mystery bookstores, so who am I to ignore Donna Tartt's bestselling debut novel, **The Secret History** (Ivy, \$6.99)? Once you've begun reading this story of five students at a private New England college, you'll find it impossible to ignore, too. We meet Richard Papen, a lonely and unsophisticated young man from California who narrates the tale. Richard's sweetness pulls the reader into his narrow life, and sets us up to cheer him on to make a connection, to break his family traditions of lovelessness and low esteem and lack of ambition. We share his elation when a door opens: Richard is admitted into an exclusive Greek class taught by an eccentric, once-famous professor to a tiny group of hand-picked students. At last Richard belongs. The question is, just what kind of club has he joined? Tartt creates high-wire tension by snapping the narration back and forth in time, and by teasing readers early on with the knowledge that there is a murder at the dark heart of this story. Like Ruth Rendell, she weaves a fascinating psychological web of undisciplined brilliance and anarchy, sexual obsession, idol-worship, and egoism.

Lia Matera's latest Laura Di Palma novel is a stunner. Attorney Di Palma is back in town. She doesn't have the high-paying job she once had; her former employer, an old and very conservative law firm, fired her for successfully defending one high-profile pro bono client too many. And she doesn't have the lover or the anonymity she had when she fled to the north woods to nurse her career's wounds. But she does have a private practice. She still has her reputation as a hard-hitter. And she has the solace of an old friend, private eye Sandy Arklett. None of it may be enough, however, when Laura's investigation of a guru who specializes in attorneys leads her to the grisly scene of a mass murder. Matera explores the flip side of the all-American dream—powerful professionals who inhabit a world of money and stress and leisure drugs, overachieving in jobs that leave little time for personal relationships and private satisfactions. In this fascinating novel, Di Palma learns how dangerous it is to take anything—or anyone—at **Face Value** (Simon & Schuster, \$19.95).

Daphne Du Maurier's novel *Rebecca* has sold oodles of copies, was made into a memorable film, and obviously inspired countless romantic-suspense novelists to follow in her footsteps. If you've never read it, do so; it's masterful. Less so is the sequel, **Mrs. de**



**Winter** (Morrow, \$21.95) by Susan Hill, who was chosen by Du Maurier's estate to continue the story of the dashing but doomed Maxim de Winter, his shy young bride, and the tragedy at their magnificent estate, Manderley. *Mrs. de Winter* cannot stand on its own without the original, for I doubt any reader will care enough about the De Winters as depicted in this book to bother reading to the end. Worse, Hill hasn't given *Mrs. de Winter* a new plot, but has opted instead to merely pick up on the couple years later, unimaginatively coping with the earlier dramatic events of *Rebecca*. The result is little more than a very, very long denouement.

Britain awarded Minette Walters' **The Ice House** (St. Martin's, \$4.99) a Best First Crime Novel award, and so do I. Three women, longtime friends, are living in seclusion at a wonderful Hampshire country house when their gardener discovers a dismembered corpse in an old ice house. The local inspector, Walsh, answers the call. He was also in charge of the investigation years earlier when Phoebe Maybury's husband disappeared. Walsh believed her to be a murderess back then, but the husband's body never turned up; he's thrilled to be able to return, this time with an actual corpse. But what of the other two women who now live with Phoebe, both of whom had alibis for the earlier crime? And has Maybury's body actually been under Walsh's nose all these years? Walters has devised a neat and twisty plot and peopled it with very memorable characters; then she's set them in the marvelous estate of Streech Grange. There are certainly secrets, but they're not the ones you expect. A stylish British mystery that packs surprises throughout.

The plot synopsis of Stuart Woods' latest novel reads like a *TV Guide* blurb for a made-for-TV movie. Fortunately, Woods is a strong writer, so **Dead Eyes** (HarperCollins, \$22) is a pretty neat thriller. Film actress Chris Callaway is beautiful and talented. She's set to go into shooting on an important project, and she is supervising the construction of her dream house in Malibu. Then she has an accident that blinds her. She loses the job and is forced to accept the prognosis that she may not regain her vision. She also becomes the target of a stalker: losing her eyesight quickly becomes secondary to the loss of security and confidence that she once knew. Woods chronicles the days of terror for a stalker victim as incidents escalate, and the steps that the police can and will take to end the harassment, and he's endowed Chris Callaway with the brains, courage, and will to defy victimhood. I won't be even mildly surprised when *Dead Eyes* shows up on cable some day soon.

Charles Paris is back again in **Corporate Bodies**, now out in



paperback (Worldwide, \$3.99). This time Simon Brett's struggling actor is appearing behind the wheel of a forklift; it seems that the lucrative world of industrial videos may finally be his key to success. And for Charles, who is seated high up in the cab of the huge forklift (and cursed with a keen eye for observation and a very long nose for other people's business), the folks at Delmoleen seem to have come right out of a bored casting director's office. There's the big boss and his well-bred wife, the loyal office "mouse," the swaggering machinist, the middle-aged marketing director, and the business school up-and-comer. There's also Dayna, the office seductress. But that's before the lunch break. When the whistle blows to start up, Dayna's body is found crushed beneath the forklift. It's deemed an accident, and no one really blames Charles for leaving the machine on. Especially Charles—who knows that he didn't. Look to Brett for sharp character sketches and keen wit, and enjoy watching Charles Paris at the job he has a real talent for: sleuthing.

**Switching the Odds**, a paperback by Phyllis Knight (St. Martin's, \$8.95), opens in Down East Maine, home of private eye Lil Ritchie. A call from her native Virginia brings her next client, wealthy businessman James Cooper, whose son has run away from prep school. Cooper thinks the boy may be up Lil's way, searching for Cooper's estranged father. But finding young Cooper is the easy part. Keeping him alive may prove to be much more difficult.

Arthur Lyons' latest Jake Asch case, a fast read, is **False Pretenses** (Mysterious Press, \$18.95), and it should please fans. A man named Jacobi comes into the office to hire Jake. He wants his wife, whom he thinks is meeting another man, followed. As Jake does so, the client manages to get himself murdered—in Jake's office, no less. Readers, by the way, may argue that Asch isn't as enlightened toward women as some of his contemporaries. You've been warned, reader.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



**C**lint Eastwood is a cop in **A Perfect World**, which he also directed. But don't expect a *Dirty Harry*-like shoot-'em-up. Because if you do, no one will make your day in this painstakingly wrought story that deals more with relationships than with car chases and big guns.

Set in Texas only three weeks before the assassination of President Kennedy, *A Perfect World* tells the story of an escaped con who takes a young boy hostage and stays one step ahead of the law while examining his own life through his budding relationship with the boy.

Kevin Costner plays Butch Haynes, a bright con on the lam in the company of a fellow escapee with a short fuse and not much common sense. It's this second man (Keith Szarabjka)

who gets himself into a sticky situation shortly after their escape and makes the kidnapping of the boy necessary.

Phillip, the straitlaced eight-year-old (T. J. Lowther), quickly learns whom to put his trust in between the "good con, bad con" kidnappers. He is shown to be right when Butch does away with his less stable partner in crime.

The two then get on with their journey, which Butch happily describes as "time traveling through Texas."

The fatherless boy and his kidnapper, whose own dad was a career criminal, become very close. "Both of us is handsome devils, both like RC cola, and neither of us got an old man worth a damn," Butch points out. He lets Phillip do things he's never done, like celebrate Halloween (his Jehovah's Wit-

ness religion doesn't allow it) and drink soda.

Through much of the film, Butch seems like a pretty good guy—he could scarcely treat the boy better and even gives him opportunities to leave, which the boy declines—but a particularly gripping scene shows another side of him, and indicates why he was in jail in the first place.

Eastwood's no-nonsense cop is veteran Texas Ranger Red Garnett, Butch's chief pursuer. He starts off as sure as a bee near nectar but seems less interested in capturing his prey than in grilling a good T-bone steak as the film unfolds.

Right off the bat, he's assigned a top criminologist to assist him, courtesy of his friend the governor. But pretty, blonde, self-assured Sally Gerber (Laura Dern) doesn't quite fit Red's image of what a cop should be, and he's initially less than cooperative.

Still, this is no mismatched buddy film in which the two cops on the case are constantly at odds. The craggy-faced, Geritol swigging Garnett seems to realize his best days may be in the rear view mirror, so he at least listens to Gerber, who is trying to bring Texas law enforcement into the twentieth century.

The film alternates between the con and the cop, bringing

them closer each step of the way, until they finally meet up in the tense and emotional climax.

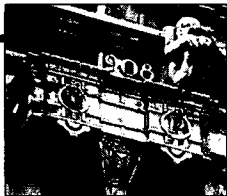
This is not a common chase film, however, in which the cop and the crook simply match wits. It's not a simple police procedural, either. The majority of the film is focused on Costner and the boy, who are perfect together.

This may be Kevin Costner's best performance yet. His drawl fits right in here. His short haircut does, too. Mostly, however, he's tender and tough, and it works. And while his "good guy" scenes with Phillip are probably more believable, his "bad guy" scenes turn up the heat a notch and make you wonder if he's going to snap all of a sudden.

Newcomer T. J. Lowther has a sad look, as if he's a boy who hasn't had much enjoyment in life. He is, however, compellingly adorable. He calls to mind the otherworldliness of the boy in *Witness*.

Eastwood is the director, so he knows how to make himself look good; nonetheless, his work is something to marvel at. From the bookend start and finish to the film to the tight close-ups he gives himself, revealing a face with more lines than unpaved roads in the Texas Panhandle, he proves himself a powerful director.

# THE STORY THAT WON



The November Mysterious by Eileen Rystrom of York, tions go to Julie G. DeGroat ton Raphael of Memphis, Bixby, Oklahoma; Laura Colorado; Shari Perkins of

Victoria, British Columbia, Canada; Karen G. Spisak of Tampa, Florida; David G. Beranek of Battle Creek, Michigan; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; and Linda J. Northey of Welland, Ontario, Canada.

Photograph contest was won Nebraska. Honorable men- of Theresa, New York; Clif- Tennessee; Elaine Blythe of Smith of Grand Junction, Fincastle, Virginia; Ed Bird

## THE BIG DOG LAUGHED by Eileen Rystrom

Old Man Spoon had built his magnificent building in 1908. He had a special statue of a dwarf Atlas holding the world on his shoulders placed over the front entrance of the building. It became a meeting place for the townsfolk. "Meet me at the hunchback," they would say.

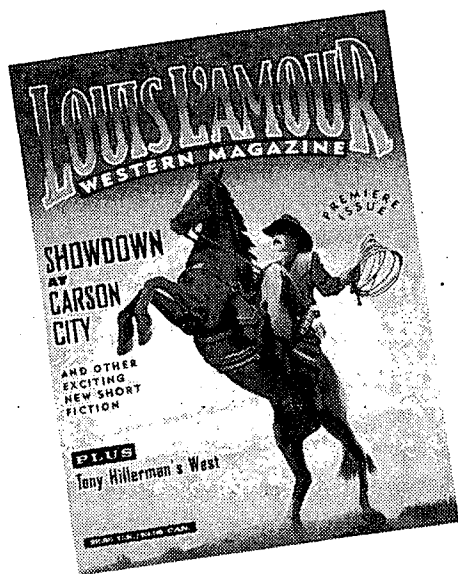
Old Man Spoon's great-grandson, T. Spoon, owned the building now and had his offices overlooking the statue. He was having a problem with his wife, Sugar Spoon, who was seeing a handsome salesman right under his nose. They would meet at the hunchback every day at three.

One day T. Spoon noticed a crack under the stone globe. Could it be loose, and could it be pushed? he wondered. He hatched a plan with his big dog, a German shepherd named Wooden.

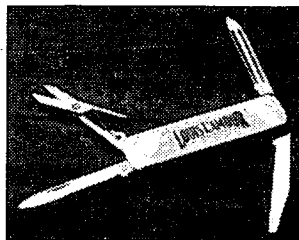
The day of the big push finally arrived. He watched Sugar as she crossed the street. "What a dish!" he said to his dog. He rushed out into the street, grabbed his wife's arm, and said, "I wouldn't . . ." while looking up at his dog in the window, who had been trained to respond to the sound "Wooden." The big dog pushed the concrete ball; the salesman jumped but was grazed on the legs by the flying concrete. Sugar cried so hard, seeing how close she'd come to death, and called her husband "my hero!" The big dog laughed to see such sport, and the dish ran away with the Spoon.

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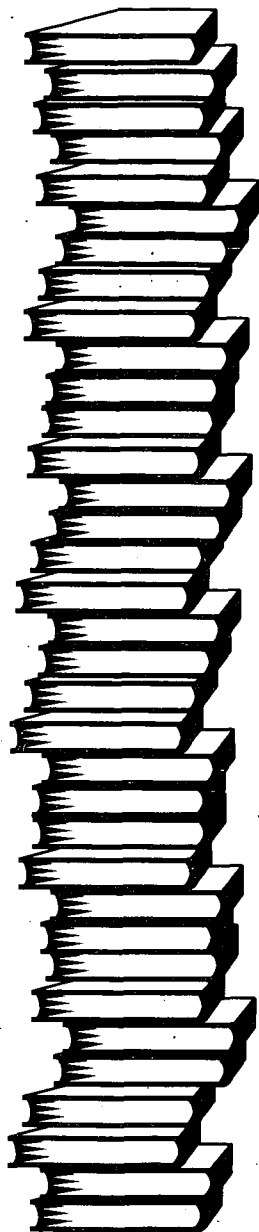
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